ABSTRACT

HOLMES, MICHAEL TODD. Creating a Positive School Culture in Newly Opened Schools. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli and Dr. Kevin Brady.)

The purpose of this study was to determine the most effective practices by school administrators when creating school culture in newly opened schools. Using semi-structured interviews, four principals who opened a new school were interviewed individually and in a focus group. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. Two themes emerged from the data. First, principals at new schools should spend a significant amount of time ensuring quality staff members are hired. Additionally, once hired, principals are responsible for providing appropriate professional development activities to better prepare staff members to meet the challenges of opening a new school. Second, principals must find a balance between their role as principal of the school and their personal and family lives. This balance takes three forms: 1) Shared Responsibility, 2) Manager vs. Instructional Leader, and 3) Personal and Family Responsibilities. Limitations to the study included generalization to other studies, personal biases and objectivity on the part of the researcher, small sample size and lack of a high school participant. By applying what has worked, and avoiding what was not successful, administrators are in a better position to ensure a smooth opening, a satisfied school community, and, most importantly, successful students, all which are reflective of the school’s culture.
Creating a Positive School Culture in Newly Opened Schools

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BIOGRAPHY

Todd Holmes was born in Fort Campbell, KY in 1971. He completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in History, with secondary teaching certification, at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. After teaching for four years at the middle school level, he took an assistant principal’s position at an elementary school. Five years later, he moved to the principalship at the elementary level. Currently, Holmes serves as the School Improvement/Beginning Teacher Coordinator for a school district in North Carolina. He has also earned Master degrees in Curriculum and Instruction and School Administration, both from North Carolina State University. Holmes is a long-time Wolfpack fan and U.S. History buff.
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Chapter 1
School Culture

“The core work of the school is the work of learning.”

- R.J. Starrat (Transforming educational administration: Meaning, community and excellence)

**Introduction**

The effects of school culture and climate have a long-term and lasting effect on the development of a school. The school’s culture includes a multitude of variables: attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, values, moral influences (or lack thereof), work ethic, and traditions of administrators, faculty, staff and students. Culture comes into the school through the recruitment and socialization of participants – students, staff, and parents (Murphy & Firestone, 1999). School administrators are charged with the task of examining the existing culture and determining if change is required. Other administrators must build a school culture from various backgrounds when opening a new school.

The challenge becomes increasingly more difficult when stakeholders are resistant to change. In order to facilitate a change in culture, an alternative to the existing “way of doing things” must be shared with the school’s stakeholders. More importantly, stakeholders must be involved in the process of change and see value and worth in the change. Administrators must recognize that, “no school culture can be truly addressed in any significant way until the context and the experiences of people are well understood” (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004, p. 3). Opening a new school is more than constructing a facility; it also requires administrators to build relationships and trust with students, staff, and the community.
Building School Culture in New Schools

As discussed in “The Growth Equation” (Kennedy, 2002), districts across America are facing the challenges of constructing schools at a pace to keep up with student enrollment. The Clark County, Nevada School District (in Las Vegas) has experienced significant growth since 1991. With the construction of 154 new schools and more than 150 additions in the past 15 years, Clark County is one of the fastest growing districts in the nation. Currently, there are only about 500 school districts in the country with more than 14,000 students. Clark County typically adds this number of new students in an average year (231,000 students in 2000 – 2001 compared to 245,000 students in 2001 – 2002). In the case of Clark County, on average, there are ten new principals faced with the challenge of building and establishing a new culture at his/her school each year.

Smith County (a rural county in North Carolina) is experiencing its own version of rapid growth. In 2004, Smith County was ranked as the state’s fastest growing county, as well as the 50th fastest growing county in the country (Woods, 2004). Since 1996, Smith County has opened nine new schools. Within the next ten years, the district anticipates opening at least another seven new schools to accommodate population growth. Smith County’s growth, however, is uneven across the district. As a “bedroom community” of a larger city, Smith County’s high growth is focused in the western communities. As the district grows, so do the responsibilities of new administrators to provide a quality educational setting with a positive school culture.

One drawback to increased enrollment at such an accelerated rate is the constant change to school boundary lines. Students may change schools several times in a span of
only three or four years. Due to growth and development in an area, new schools may open
closer to a student’s home or alignment districts may change (elementary to middle school to
high school). As the population of any given school may change (up to 40% of the student
population in Clark County changes schools each year), the difficulty of building and
establishing a school culture grows exponentially.

Many educators automatically assume that becoming principal of a new school is
preferred over assuming leadership at an established school. New schools offer up-to-date
physical facilities, greater freedom to organize according to personal style, and more ease to
innovate and to depart from past practices. When opening a new school, the principal has
more opportunities to select teachers who fit with his/her plans. The principal will not have
to deal with an entrenched faculty due to loyalty to past administration. However, this is
often a misconception, as a newly opened school faces its own set of unique challenges
(Sarason, 1996).

Principals in new schools spend almost all of their time addressing housekeeping
issues – ordering books and furniture, assigning rooms, developing schedules and
interviewing prospective personnel. Particularly with a new principal opening a new school,
the complexity of housekeeping is more than they imagined and more than they are prepared
for. A major goal becomes opening the building on time and in good order. Very little
emphasis is placed on what life in the classroom should be, how teachers will be involved in
decisions and planning about educational values and goals, development of the school
climate and culture, and the role of parents, neighborhoods, and community in the school. In
many instances, the principal is concerned with these issues but does not know what to do about them (Sarason, 1996).

When an administrator is asked to open a new facility, the responsibility for developing continuing symbolic aspects of school culture lies with them. How will the decisions a new administrator makes today affect the school and community in twenty years? A leader’s clear sense of values and purpose makes it easier for the staff and community to know where it is that you want the school to go (Nomura, 1999). In terms of opening a new school building, the administrator’s sense of values and purpose will be directly reflected in the culture (both its development and application) of the school.

Culture provides “stability, fosters certainty, solidifies order and predictability and creates meaning” (Bolman & Deal, 2002, p. 25). New administrators must recognize that culture exists in schools and understand the implications for establishing new cultural norms. In a newly opened school, culture should be a guiding principal for the administration. What defines the culture will, in essence, define the school.

**Purpose of the Study**

Administrators benefit from the time spent planning for the opening of school. An integral part of the planning process involves developing and building a school culture. Central to the development of a school culture is an examination of administrators who have worked to establish a positive and successful school culture at his/her school. New administrators, in their role as life-long learners, must take advantage of the rich experiences, successes, and pitfalls of those who have already traveled down the “change of culture” road. The experiences, the real-life situations, and the roadblocks faced by these veteran
administrators provide valuable information and knowledge for school leaders hoping to facilitate change in schools. The purpose of this study is to determine the most effective practices by school administrators when creating school culture in newly opened schools.

**Research Questions**

Numerous questions arise when trying to determine how to build and develop a school culture. The primary research question explored in this study is: What are the central elements required in the planning, establishment, and building of a school culture? Subquestions to be examined in the study include: Who are the stakeholders that should be involved, and to what extent? How does an administrator’s personal belief system impact the vision of the school? Since each school is unique in and of itself, no specific blueprint can be generated to “build” a culture. An ongoing framework, however, can be established and shared with other administrators preparing to either change an existing culture (trying to instill value in academics at a low performing school) or build a culture from scratch (establishing one culture from several existing cultures at a new school). No matter the case, careful reflection and deliberation is required in order for school leaders to take full advantage of the experiences of their peers.

**Definitions**

Currently, there are very few descriptions and analyses of new schools and their cultures (Sarason, 1996). A school’s culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. Culture “implies that rituals, climate, values and behaviors (form) a coherent whole” (Schein, 1992, pp. 10–11), as well as “the way of life of a group of people”
Whereas no single factor determines a school’s culture, “the interactions of various school and classroom … factors can create a fabric of support that enables all members of the school community to teach and learn at optimum levels” (Freiberg, 1998, p. 22). For the purposes of this study, school culture is defined as the “values and symbols that affect organizational climate” (Wren, 1999, p. 594).

School climate can be defined as a relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by stakeholders. It affects their behavior and is based on their collective perceptions of behavior in the school. The climate is, basically, the “school’s personality” (Hoy and Miskel, 1996). Symbolic aspects of school activities (i.e. traditions, rites and rituals) must also be considered for these are “the values that are transmitted literally from one generation of the organization to another” (Wren, 1999, p. 594). Often what is said or done is not nearly as important as its symbolic significance (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Navigating among these aspects of a school’s culture is difficult enough for a veteran administrator. Adding the extra element of trying to establish a culture at a new school creates a mountainous task for an administrator and staff.

Edgar Schein (1985) provides a more complex definition of culture: “the deepest level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion and organizations view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to a group’s problems of survival in the external environment and its problems of internal interpretation. They come to be taken for granted because they solve these problems repeatedly and reliably” (p. 6).
Culture can be furthered defined as “a concept of a learned pattern of consciousness (or semiconscious) thought, reflected and reinforced by behavior that silently and powerfully shapes the experience of a people. Culture provides stability, fosters certainty, solidifies order and predictability and creates meaning” (Bolman & Deal, 2001, p. 25). In a newly opened school, Bolman and Deal’s (2001) definition of culture should be a guiding principal for leadership. What defines the culture will, in essence, define the school. New students, parents, and community members will gain an understanding of expectations, policies, procedures, values, and meanings of both symbolic and concrete aspects of the school through acquisition of the school’s culture. Developing school culture may be the most difficult task for a new administrator. However, it is the most essential. School culture, whether it is positive or negative, will be the driving factor behind the success (or lack thereof) of the school.

Overview of Methodology

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative study, grounded in narrative research, was conducted. Research focused on the use of thick description – “data pulled from participants that produces for readers the feeling that they experience, or perhaps could experience, the events described” (Creswell, 1998, p. 184). Data from interviews with four administrators who have served as the principal at a newly opened school was examined. Participants were recruited from the Smith County Schools district on a strictly volunteer basis. In accordance with the study, only those principals who were the lead administrator in the first year a school was opened were interviewed.
Significance of the Study

By focusing on examining the lived experiences of administrators who have opened a new school, this study is significant because it will provide readers with insight on building and establishing a positive school culture at newly opened schools. As districts in North Carolina and around the country continue to grow, newly appointed administrators will have access to the skills, strategies, and foresight from school leaders who were once in their same position. The study will not only provide successful strategies, but will also allow school leaders the opportunity to avoid common pitfalls and learn from the mistakes of others. It will be useful to policy makers, central office personnel and professional development staff because it will provide tips and strategies that can be incorporated into the training and mentoring of new principals. As such, the study will have significant implications for leadership training and development. The study will also add to the knowledgebase in school culture.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 examines the literature on school culture and draws connection between common themes and findings. In Chapter 3 the study’s methodology is explained in detail. Chapter 4 contains the findings of the study, which are then discussed in relation to the research literature on school culture and change in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 also discusses the implications of the study’s findings for research on school culture and change, as well as the implications for practitioners. The research will provide valuable insight as administrators, central service personnel and professional
development coordinators prepare to meet the significant challenge of building and establishing a positive school culture at a newly opened school.
Chapter 2
Review of the Literature

Introduction

“A school’s culture has far more influence on the life and learning in the schoolhouse than the school board, the teachers, or even the principal could ever have” (Barth, 2002, p. 6). School culture is not, “based on the theories learned at a university that help make decisions in classrooms, but teachers’ own beliefs expressed by actions rather than words” (Prince, 1989, p. 3). An individual cannot, alone, change the school’s culture. Further, there is no quick and simple way to change the culture or climate of schools. Long-term systematic effort is more likely to produce change than short-term fads (Hoy and Miskel, 1996). An effective leader, however, can provide forms of leadership that invite others to join in developing a school culture that provides a safe, welcoming atmosphere that promotes learning and success (Barth, 2002). Effective leaders spend considerable time developing an effective school culture, since nothing can be accomplished if the culture is faulty (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993).

Research on School Culture

A school’s climate and culture is reflected in the principal’s leadership style (Berger, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Rosenblum & Jastrzab, 1998). In addition to their instructional and managerial duties, principals are responsible for many intangible aspects of the development of the school’s culture. Principals must keep in mind that the spirit of the school and the enthusiasm of the staff reflect the principal’s role of morale builder. The principal builds staff morale by enabling staff members to feel positive, enthusiastic, and secure in their
work. A principal’s recognition of the importance of home-school-community relations is crucial in the success of the school, as well. Principals also determine whether the school climate and culture are inviting and welcoming to parents and visitors. Without the support of stakeholders, school initiatives are less likely to succeed (Berger, 2000).

Current research and literature on the topic of building and establishing school culture provides many examples of effective leadership and perceptions of what stakeholders (staff, students, and parents) believe must take place in order to build a school culture. Much of the early literature on school culture is directed towards change and school improvement and assumes that understanding culture is a prerequisite to making schools more effective (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Culture can be defined as “an organization’s traditional practices and modes of operating or its climate and general ambiance” (Evans, 1996, p. 4). School culture “offers an effective means of coordination and control and a center of shared purpose and values that provide inspiration, meaning and significance for the members of the school community” (Evans, 1996, p. 46). For the purposes of this study, individual and specific subcultures embedded within schools were not examined. Whereas each subculture makes its own unique contributions to the school, the focus of the research is on the role of the principal in developing the overall school culture.

Culture can be broken down into three levels – artifacts, values, and basic assumptions. Artifacts are the most tangible of the three levels. Artifacts can be described in terms of the physical and social environment of the school. A school’s physical space, its language, style of dress, climate, norms for behavior, customs, rituals, and ceremonies are all examples of artifacts of the school’s culture. These artifacts can be difficult to interpret to an
outsider. Without prior knowledge, they may or may not have meaning to someone from the outside looking in (Evans, 1996).

Values are more complex; they develop as problems are resolved. As a solution gains credibility from continued success in solving problems, it is ultimately accepted as a reality. Eventually, the reality is transformed into a shared value or belief that is taken for granted. The deepest level of culture lies in basic assumptions. Basic assumptions are fundamental, shared convictions that guide behavior and shape the way group members perceive, think, and feel. They are invisible and nearly invincible (Evans, 1996).

Culture can also be viewed as, “a system of attitudes, actions and artifacts that endures over time and (produces) among its members a relatively unique common psychology” (Vaill, 1989, p. 147). Inferences can be drawn from the unique common psychology (i.e. culture) of a school by studying its artifacts and values. A school’s culture maintains fundamental similarities in thinking and feeling, perceiving and valuing. Through the unique common psychology, meaning is assigned to artifacts, actions, and attitudes. However, in order to fully understand and appreciate the culture, members must participate in the life of the school for a prolonged period of time (Evans, 1996).

Culture also represents the collective knowledge of our predecessors. It is perpetually renewed as new members are introduced into the community. Based on values and basic assumptions, culture dictates how people interpret and react to events. New members are given direction on how to define and respond to problems, in addition to how to master new events by assimilating them into the situations of meaning they have already acquired (Evans, 1996).
As these assumptions and beliefs permeate an entire organization, they become invisible. After awhile, they become so accepted, so automatic, and ingrained in the organization’s routine practices that they are automatically taught to its new members. New people are initiated, inducted, and assimilated into the organization by the culture. Culture is a “living, breathing entity – it must be understood, cared for, and transformed” (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993, p. 33). The assumptions and beliefs within any culture are viewed as, “the correct way to perceive, think and feel” (Evans, 1996, p. 41). Culture, although complex in nature, is simply “the way we do things around here.”

When examining culture, we must also distinguish between two separate but complimentary views of school culture: descriptive culture and prescriptive culture. Descriptive culture is reflected in the multilayered reality that social scientists study through systematic observations over time and that are described in ethnographies and portraits. Descriptive culture focuses on “behavioral patterns, traditions, values, core beliefs, and norms that shape and sustain the school and the people within it” (King & Blumer, 2000, p. 357). Prescriptive culture – “a vision that a school or school system seeks to make real” (King & Blumer, 2000, p. 357) – is often voiced by a leader. Only later will the prescriptive culture’s vision be embraced and internalized by the faculty, staff, students, parents, and the community (King & Blumer, 2000).

A central task for a school leader at a new school is to find out as much as possible about the existing descriptive culture of the school system and schools feeding into the new facility. At the same time, the school leader must begin laying the groundwork for shaping the prescriptive culture. School leaders must try and see things as they are and begin to help
people visualize ways in which they can be better (King & Blumer, 2000). This “reculturing” of the school is characterized by developing collaborative work cultures that focus in a sustained way on the continuous preparation and professional development of teachers in relation to creating and assessing learning conditions for all students (Fullan, 1995).

**Principal as Change Agent**

In her article “Survival Skills for the New Principal,” Joanne Rooney (2000) outlines some common pitfalls new administrators should avoid when examining the culture at their new school. Rooney identifies a key player in the custodial role of maintaining a school’s culture – the secretary. New administrators must recognize this unofficial job responsibility and take the time to learn about the school culture from the secretary. The influence of “peripheral personnel,” including the school secretary and custodial staff, must not go unnoticed (Sarason, 1995). Additionally, new administrators must respect the school’s culture. Rooney advises new administrators to be leery of making wide-sweeping and drastic changes to the established traditions and culture of a school. The new administrator must allow time to analyze and reflect on what elements of the school’s culture should be changed and what elements are effective (Rooney, 2000). When new administrators listen carefully to what others tell them about the school’s culture, they can avoid two common pitfalls: trying to fix things that are not broken and breaking things that seem to be working well (King & Blumer, 2000).

The local site is seen as the critical force for change and improvement in today’s schools. Change is “inevitably, empirically, and theoretically nonlinear” (Fullan, 1996, p.
In order for any change to take place and for any change to succeed, the principal must demonstrate positive leadership and support for the initiative. In many ways, the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school, “but far from the only factor in the development of the school’s identity” (Smith, 1987, p. 169). The principal is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. It is the principal’s leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the development of a positive (or not so positive) culture and the level of professionalism and morale of teachers. The principal is the main link between the community and the school. The way the principal performs this duty largely determines the attitudes of parents and students about the school (Rosenblum & Jastrzab, 1981).

Any proposal for change that intends to alter the quality of life in schools depends primarily on the principal. As Rosenblum and Jastrzab explain, “The principal is the gatekeeper of change. If you had to pick one figure in the school system who really matters in terms of whether you get change or not, it is the principal” (p. 9). It is apparent that a principal who is effective in facilitating change is one who is an effective principal in general (Rosenblum & Jastrzab, 1981). Through the establishment of professional relationships with others, the principal develops a medium for converging the values, beliefs and expectations about norms for behavior in his/her school (Blumenreich, 2005).

In order to change the school culture, an administrator must become aware of the culture they are dealing with. Roland Barth (2002) makes a solid point in his article “The Culture Builder” with his analogy of a fish trying to discover water; so immersed in the water, the fish has little hope of “discovering” the water. The same can be said of those
working within the school culture – so immersed in the culture, school personnel have difficulty looking at their school culture from an objective viewpoint. Sometimes, when elements of the school’s culture require adjustment, an outside viewpoint is more conducive to promote effective change. In order to change the school culture, however, a more desirable quality is required to replace the existing unhealthy element. Elements that may require adjustment, or even replacement, include attitudes and perceptions by teachers, parent involvement, student opinions on the quality and value of education they are receiving, and community involvement (Barth, 2002).

Attempts to change a setting, culture or perceptions of the culture “have to be based on an understanding of how those in the setting view the setting and themselves” (Sarason, 1995, p. 69). School culture refers to those aspects of the setting that are viewed by school personnel as “givens” and “essential elements”. Examining laws and regulations does not reveal the culture of the school, just as it cannot be understood merely from knowledge of types of activities or their frequency. Members of a culture have an awareness that they posses special knowledge, values, and obligations which have a history in the life of the individual and the organization. Structure and meaning for the present and future can be found within this special knowledge (Sarason, 1995).

Building school culture requires the will to transform the elements of school culture that support rather than subvert the school’s purposes (Barth, 2002). A major supporting theme to a school’s culture is in establishing a positive school climate conducive to student safety, emotional well-being, and academic success. In a study that emerged from a principals-in-training course in administrative theory at Stephen F. Austin State University,
Harris and Lowery (2002) summarize teacher beliefs in behaviors most valued in a principal for creating a positive school climate. A total of 123 teachers were surveyed from schools ranging in size from 250 – 1,000 students. Three central themes emerged from the responses. First, the teachers noted that principals established a positive school climate by treating students fairly and equally. Examples of this type of behavior include establishing expectations and maintaining standards, handling student discipline confidentially, and having equitable consequences for infractions, regardless of student background or family connections.

Second, positive, two-way communication is essential in establishing a positive school climate. Teachers cited principals who are available to meet with students, formally and informally. Students know they are valued when the principal makes time to eat lunch with them, sends an e-mail message, or meets with a student group to discuss concerns. The third theme that emerged from the Harris and Lowery study was continued support for students by the principal. Students need adults to care about them and their personal interests. Principals who are accessible to students through an open-door policy, walking the campus, or participating in classroom activities demonstrate their willingness to support students in their endeavors. Harris and Lowery conclude that a principal who treats students with respect, communicates with students and supports students will create a positive school climate (Harris & Lowery, 2002).

Michael Fullan (2002) in “The Change Leader” suggests that it is the principal who must lead the way for cultural changes in schools. The principal of the future must be attuned to the big picture, a sophisticated thinker who transforms the organization through people and
teams. The “big picture” extends beyond the individual school or individual school goals. The principal of the future acts with the intention of making a positive difference in their own schools as well as improving the environment in other district schools. True leaders, according to Fullan, help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways. Being a visionary is an essential characteristic of a school leader who is charged with establishing school culture.

A second point Fullan makes focuses on the relationships that must be established and maintained in order to build school culture. According to Fullan (2002), “the single factor common to success…is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, schools get better” (p. 20). Effective leaders build relationships with diverse people and groups. The relevance of this concept is often downplayed. In order to build a school culture that is reflective of all members of the school community, inclusion of diverse student and community populations is a must. Taking the time to develop and nurture relationships is a characteristic of a leader with vision, a leader who looks past boosting the achievement scores for next year and focuses on on-going and long-lasting success (Fullan, 2002).

Don Davies (2002) and Lori Korinek (1999) express several similar ideas about the establishment of school culture. Both authors stress the importance of establishing solid relationships with parents and communities as a means of building school culture. Davies, a long-time researcher on effective schools, points out that there is evidence that schools that are friendly and welcoming to family members have an easier time creating positive cultures (Davies, 2002). Korinek supports this notion by describing ways to involve a student’s community and cultural background in building school climate (Korinek, 1999). Both
authors contend that only through strong leadership and vision can an administrator hope to develop, or change, the culture of a school.

Gordon Donaldson and George Marnik (1995) encourage administrators to develop plans for building the school culture that target better student learning opportunities. Donaldson and Marnik work on the assumption that the purpose of schools is to improve student achievement. By focusing on increased opportunities for student learning, administrators are allowed a formal assessment tool to evaluate effective, or ineffective, leadership strategies (Donaldson & Marnik, 1995).

In order to establish a school culture, effective leaders must be in place in new schools. In many cases, the administrator will have to facilitate a change in mindset of the new staff and redirect many pre-existing notions. The ideas of the principal are important in a variety of ways for the identity of the school (Smith, 1987). If the school does not have a good principal the chances of the school being effective are severely limited (Prince, 1989).

Additionally, effective leaders provide opportunities for professional development for the school’s staff (Barnet, 2004). Addressed in Standard II of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), the culture of teaching and learning at a school has a strong emphasis on school administrators providing effective and meaningful professional development. The principal as instructional leader promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. Just as leaders must shape environments that value students, they must also create environments that lead teachers and other staff members to feel valued and respected. Teachers must feel that their leaders will do whatever is necessary
to provide them with the training, materials, guidance and support they need to educate their students to attain high academic standards. In short. The culture of the school must invite teachers to step beyond comfortable instructional patterns to explore approaches that will reach all students (Johnson & Uline, 2005).

The first step in any change initiative starts with the leader – leaders can more easily affect self-change, which may trigger change in others (Evans, 1996). Principals set the tone for the agenda, official and unofficial, for the school. There is good evidence that teacher/principal cultural links are the most powerful forces in facilitating local school improvement. If teachers believe that their principal can lead them into forming a better school, they will willingly cooperate and enjoy the process (Prince, 1989).

Organizations that set out to change their own culture remain powerfully influenced by the preexisting culture, even as it attempts to initiate change. Even those who seek to create new settings are faced with the challenge of overcoming the way of thinking that led to the very conditions leaders hope to remedy (Evans, 1996). Attitudes, perceptions, and states of mind do not simply change because of a new idea, theory, or program. Change occurs in response to the leader who models change with their behavior. When the beliefs and values of the school reflect the acceptance of the administrator’s initiative, then real change can occur (Donaldson & Marnik, 1995).

According to Robert Evans (1996), “in order for change to take place, (we) must get at the fundamental, underlying, systematic features of school life; (we) must change the behaviors, norms and beliefs of the practitioners” (p. 5). Real culture change involves “a systematic change at a deep psychological level involving attitudes, actions and artifacts that
have developed over substantial periods of time” (Vaill, 1989, pp. 149 – 150). Change in any setting can take one of two forms, first order change or second order change. In first order change, improvements are attempted on preexisting strategies. These are usually “one shot” attempts, single, incremental, and isolated. First order change does not significantly alter the basic features of the school or the way members perceive their roles.

Second order change is systematic in nature and aims to modify the way an organization is put together. Second order change alters an organization’s assumptions, goals, structures, roles, and norms. It requires people to change their beliefs and perceptions. Visionary leaders are able to convey ideas new to the culture in a consistent, enthusiastic, and practical manner, such that the information may serve as a vision of trends and changes and new ways to educate children (Prince, 1989). In some cases, second order change seeks to change the culture of the school. In others, a new culture must be introduced into the school to facilitate a positive change in the school (Evans, 1996).

The people who work in the culture are the ones who know what reforms are acceptable and which ones can be implemented successfully. The problems that cause ineffective schools are typically related to the culture and its malice toward the initiatives of effectiveness. In essence, the culture serves as a self-perpetuating counter force to effectiveness. Culture building requires that the school leaders give attention to the informal, subtle, and symbolic aspects of school life. These aspects, in turn, shape the beliefs and actions of each members of the school family (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993).

The task of leadership is to “create and support the culture necessary to foster an attitude of effectiveness in everything that is done within the school” (Cunningham &
Cresso, 1993, p. 25). Once the attitude is achieved and supported by the culture, all other aspects of the school will fall in line. When a strong administrator uses a new style of leadership, introduces new curriculum guidelines or district mandates, staff and students may follow the directive. This, however, does not imply that they have changed their ideas, values, or beliefs from the predominant culture (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993).

**Schools as Communities**

Allowing individual members an opportunity to collaborate assists staff in developing a common understanding and language out of which the common culture will emerge. Collaboration stimulates dialogue and the sharing of values, knowledge, expertise, thoughts, aspirations, visions, and difficulties in a supportive and positive atmosphere. People cannot work together effectively until they get to know one another. In order for the culture of a school to evolve, members must get to know one another, how they think, and why they think that way (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993).

As a new administrator begins to conceptualize their vision of the ideal school culture they must not only trust themselves, but they must trust their colleagues as well. It is important for a leader to be open and honest about what they are willing to accept and what they are not willing to accept in the school culture. Being honest in the developmental stages allows newly hired staff members a better understanding of who the leader is and what they views as important. In addition, effective leaders must be willing to listen to staff members (Donaldson & Marnik, 1995). As previously mentioned, a newly created staff brings a variety of experiences, expertise, and backgrounds to the school. Leaders can pull from this
plethora of experience to create a balance with their own leadership style (Donaldson & Marnik, 1995).

Thomas Sergiovanni in *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* (1996) contends “the ultimate purpose of school leadership is the transform the school into a moral community” (p. 45). Schools, as a community whose central purpose is to educate students, have a “morally good” mission (Myers & Simpson, 1998, p. 29). Additionally, moral purpose keeps teachers close to the needs of children and youth” (Fullan, 1993, p. 12). Collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gap for all individuals and schools (Fullan, 2004). Given that the leadership style of the administrator will directly affect the culture of the school, it is fair to say the culture of a school should reflect a moral foundation. Before the culture of the school can be fully developed, however, as sense of community must first be established.

Within a community “organized around relationships and common ideas, create social structures that bond people together in a oneness and that bind them to a set of shared values and ideas” culture will evolve (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 47). Culture can be said to exist in the community when the norms, values, and traditions are resilient enough to survive the passage of members through the community, are taught to new members, celebrated in customs and rituals, and embodied as standards that govern life in the community (Sergiovanni, 1996). Additionally, calling something “culture” implies “not only that it is shared but that it also runs very deep, is very stable and is integrated into a larger text” (Evans, 1996, p. 42).
Viewing schools as a moral institution, community norms and values are often applied. Communities do not place as much emphasis on universal rules. Communities are more likely to treat situations on an individual basis, placing values over rules and evaluating situations in a more open-ended way. Communities can be defined by their values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of “we” from the “I” of each individual. The culture of the school, based on the creation of the school community, focuses more on the commitments, obligations, and duties that people feel towards each other and the school (Sergiovanni, 1996).

Additionally, the school as a community implies that members sincerely believe in the moral goodness that justifies the school’s existence. Individuals who share a common culture within a community have a common understanding of what they want to accomplish (mission) and share ideas how they can reach these goals. Relationships and ideas among people hold them together. Members feel as though they belong because of whom they are rather than what role they play. In a community, values, caring, and people-to-people attachments are more important than rules and regulations (Myers & Simpson, 1998).

When the purpose or mission of a school is agreed upon by the community it can serve as the glue to hold that community together. A unified mission provides a foundation on which shared values and beliefs can develop. Interpersonal connectedness and personal bonds can be established. The mission, shared values, loyalties and bonds that underline the community can then establish the norms of the culture. It is these norms that guide behavior, give meaning to the day-to-day activities and establish group and personal direction (Myers & Simpson, 1998).
In transforming school culture, administrators must involve the members of the greater community. How will the school generate a sense of family, neighborliness, and collegiality among the faculty? What kinds of school-parent relationships need to be cultivated to include parents in the community? How will shared values be developed with students, parents, and other community members (Sergiovanni, 1996)? If the culture of a school is a reflection of the community, then the community must be a part of the development of the culture. When parents, the community, the teachers, and the students share a rapport, learning occurs. School personnel must include parents in as many activities as possible. Effective schools seek out relationships with the community. They see parents more as a part of the solution than as part of the problem. They pursue programs and activities that are based on two-way capacity building in order to mobilize the resources of both the community and the school (Fullan, 2000).

Thinking about school culture and its roots in community provides focus for the goals of the community. Through shared purpose and values, connections between members of the community and the over-arching implications of the community’s moral authority, members have a sense of direction and purpose. A community must exist before a culture can develop; culture is the constant that gathers climate, norms, formal philosophy, customs, and symbols into a unique and profound structure (Evans, 1996). Communities exist because they have an established culture. With community as a foundation, bricks and mortar do not define school culture. A school’s culture emerges from the values, ideas, and relationships generated by the community (Sergiovanni, 1996).
No school culture can be truly addressed in any significant way until the context and the experiences of people are well understood. The more is known about the context of culture and its unique impact on the individuals involved, the more power you have to address the issues that may arise within the community (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004). In compiling a summary of experienced principals of practices that support a caring school culture, Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin and Maureen Taylor identify several strategies for the new administrator to consider when trying to develop a positive school culture. First, administrators must connect with the stakeholders of the community. All too often, the pressures of the position create a situation of isolation. Administrators are encouraged to maintain relationships and networks with faculty, staff, students, parents, and community leaders (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004).

Next, administrators should maintain positive, two-way communication with colleagues as the school culture evolves. Talking about issues, problems, and pending situations allows a dialogue of resolution to begin. Once aware of and clear about the situation, school leaders can make a choice as to other ways to explore an issue and seek a solution. Finally, administrators are reminded to limit pressure by remembering that they have multiple identities. Administrators need to make a choice as to when you can let go of pressures and when you have to face them. Be clear with yourself and employees that, as the principal, it is your responsibility to take specific actions, even if, as a person, you really dislike the course of action you have to take (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004).

Beaudoin and Taylor also caution new administrators to resist the temptation associated with the pressures of power to have “your fingers” in everything. Keep in mind
that the community must be willing to engage in a practice on their own for the practice to be
successful. Finally, new administrators must accept that they will never fulfill the pressure of
doing it all. Administrators must develop their own personal standards for what counts as
having accomplished something at the end of the day (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004).
Maintaining a careful balance between one’s personal beliefs and administrative
responsibilities is crucial. The administrator must retain their personal identity or risk
becoming consumed by the duties and pressures of the principalship.

Changes to a School’s Culture

Schools have a common structure that is almost impervious to change (Murphy &
Louis, 1999). In Revisiting “The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change” (1996),
Seymour Sarason examines school culture and methods for implementing change from
within a school. In a newly opened school, the method of change involves altering
preexisting perceptions of what comprises school culture. Additionally, change involves
merging the variety of school cultures from existing schools that are coming together to form
a new school. The principal, as observer, encounters the difficulty as being, “personally part
of a structure – be it in the school or in one outside of it – his or her perceptions and thinking
are in various ways incomplete, selective and distorted” (Sarason, 1996, p. 29). As a member
of the school culture, we do not see the characteristics of the culture independent of our
particular place in it (Sarason, 1996).

According to Sarason, a major barrier to our understanding of the school culture, and
how it develops, is the lack of systematic, comprehensive, and objective descriptions of the
natural history of the change process in schools (Sarason, 1996). Sarason asserts, “Until we
have a more comprehensive and dispassionate description of the process of change in an the school culture – which would be revealing of the formal and informal structures of the school – any effort to introduce change maximizes the role of ignorance with its all too familiar consequences” (Sarason, 1996, p. 36).

Three barriers are significant in the current lack of understanding the school culture: 1) undue reliance of a psychology of individuals that does not provide an adequate basis for studying structural characteristics of a society; 2) observers are not neutral, and what they observe about their own or someone else’s setting is to an undetermined extent biased by the structure, traditions and ideology of their own setting; and 3) particular in relation to the school culture, our ignorance about how change occurs is vast (Sarason, 1996).

Substantive school reform requires that the culture of a school be changed (Blasé & Blasé, 1997). The role of the principal is crucial in implementing any sort of change at the school level. Principals have the capacity to incorporate knowledge and resources on a district, site, and classroom level. Any type of system change puts the principal in the role of “implementer” at the site level (Sarason, 1996). The role of the classroom teacher is somewhat different than that of the principal. Teachers are relatively autonomous in their classrooms. Teachers are not generally expected, and seldom taught, to work together (Buchen, 2004). Within most schools, teachers have little to do with other teachers, particularly at the secondary level. More often than not, teachers within a school do not feel themselves to be part of a working or planning group.

Teachers may identify with each other in terms of role and place of work, and may feel loyalty to each other and the school. However, rarely do they feel a part of the working
group that discusses, plans, and helps make educational decisions. Teachers are “loners,” initially not by design, and “this undoubtedly affects what they think about and how they view the school and the school’s culture” (Sarason, 1996, p. 141). Teachers in most schools work in a paradoxical world – working in isolation and yet wanting to share. As it stands “teacher cultures not only reinforce isolation and precludes collaboration, but it also enshrines the average and often endorses mediocrity” (Buchen, 2004, p. 36).

One of the major charges of developing culture at a newly opened school is merging the preexisting cultures from the schools reassigned to the new site. Students, parents, and teachers all bring their own concepts of what the school culture should be. The culture from the site they are leaving represented the only, and therefore the natural and inevitable, way to be and to do things. Their previous experiences with school culture consisted of all the ways of living and provided systems of meaning. Past conceptions of culture are present in each member’s experiences and expectations. This dictates how people should look and talk, think and act, behave, understand what is allowed and encouraged, as well as recognize the things you are not supposed to do (Brooker, 2002).

Members of one culture grow aware that there is specialist knowledge to be acquired in relation to outside worlds. In order to successfully function in a different culture, rules, knowledge, and skills must be learned. Students experience a multitude of cultures, unique to each individual. Home and family is usually first, followed by community and school. A child’s understanding of learning in the home shapes each child’s encounter with the school culture and learning. Some students “come to school from a culture so dissimilar to the
existing school culture that they face huge obstacles in learning the school’s way of doing things” (Brooker, 2002, p. 152).

Establishing a school culture is a fundamental element of an administrator’s responsibility. Whether trying to implement change at an existing school, or attempting to build a culture at a new school, careful thought and deliberation are required. Changing the culture of a school requires that participants be change agents who believe in the change, who feel they have an important part to play in its achievement, and who feel respected and valued by others (Blasé & Blasé, 1997). Administrators cannot install a “packaged” approach that has worked well in one school and expect it to work well in another. Each school must solve its own problems through its own culture. Effective cultures invite and support continuous improvement from within rather than externally developed reforms (Cunningham & Cresso, 1993).

**Charter Schools**

When discussing new schools, administrators can benefit from the experiences of those educators who have had the opportunity to open a charter school. A charter school is an alternative educational setting designed to provide a very specific educational outcome for a very specific group of students. Charter schools rest on a devastating critique of the present system. Opening a charter school implies that for a school to innovatively achieve a more desirable outcome, it must be free of the usual rules, regulations and traditions of a school system. For public schools, this freedom may not be as evident (Sarason, 1998).

No one sets out to create a new school (charter, public or private) that will be a replica of an existing school. In some way, or ways, the new setting will be superior, better
than, more distinctive, than comparable settings. The new school is intended to demonstrate that its end “product” will be an improvement over comparable settings. It is this sense of uniqueness that is so powerfully motivating and captivating to those opening the new school (Sarason, 1998). The principal seems to understand the potential of a new school. It is the principal who helps transform the school by actively building group cooperation and spirit, although at times there can be concerns with “letting go” and giving staff and students a chance to solve their own problems (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). By virtue of the new and presumably innovative facilities, the school would in some ways make for a superior educational experience for students. Being tapped to open a new school implies that the principal is someone that will capitalize on the opportunity to improve or enrich the educational experience (Sarason, 2002).

Opening a new school requires administrators to be almost exclusively future orientated. Administrators opening a new school are far more clear about what the new school will look like and accomplish than they are about what they will have to do, the resources they will need and the time it will require to achieve their purposes. Opening a new school requires the staff to work together in a manner in which they have had very little experience (Branch, 2003). As Sarason points out (1998), “Choosing a core group who will play major roles in the creation of the new setting is the first task at hand” (p. 30). The primary criteria in the selection of the new staff is whether or not the teacher fits in with the distinctive features the principal wants to have (Sarason, 2002). So captivated by their vision of the future and the power of their sense of uniqueness that they hope and believe that with the “right” kind of people and resources, attaining operational status will not present difficult
problems. The business of opening a new school is an exercise in multitasking (Blumenreich, 2005). Administrators opening new schools “come quickly to perceive that the process of creating a new (school) involves so many minor and major steps and problems that there is little or not time to deal with other than matters of internal development” (Sarason, 1998, p. 28). Additionally, there are a “myriad of details a principal of a new school confronts, they vary from the piddling to the crucial and they are very time consuming” (Sarason, 2002, p. 39). The period of time between being appointed the principal of a new school and the opening is a period of anxiety, problems and frustration (Sarason, 2002).

One issue associated with the governance of new schools is finding a balance between creating a climate and culture that is based on respect and trust with students, while at the same time setting appropriate limits for the students. Establishing a clear vision for the school can assist administrators in this difficult task. Without a clear vision, schools have a more difficult time with the decision-making processes and policy setting. A clear vision allows a school to “establish predictable policies, as well as expectations for their community members, all of which flow from this common understanding of what the school is about” (Sarason, 1998, p. 58).

A major obstacle for the creation of new schools lies in maintaining the status quo of traditional governance structures for schools. Traditions and cultures of existing schools present barriers for innovation in new schools. One such barrier is how teachers have been traditional involved in the decision-making process. Although teachers are by far the largest group of staff at a school, their ideas, attitudes and experiences play little or no role in
formulating proposals for reforms. Teachers are asked or mandated to implement reforms from which they had little or no input. The same can be said for students, parents and others who are vested in the success of the school. Administrators are cautioned to avoid this common misstep and actively engaged all stakeholders (Sarason, 2002).

**Leadership and School Culture**

Across the United States, school systems are faced with the difficult challenge of hiring qualified principals. By some estimates, more than half of all principals are expected to retire by 2006 (Peterson & Kelly, 2001). This represents one of the most massive transformations of leadership in a century. Districts will have the unique opportunity, as well as the significant challenge, of recruiting, selecting, training, and motivating an entirely new group of leaders.

Primary to the opening of a new school, the district must hire a principal who is a good leader. Opening a school requires a leader who can not only help develop a direction and focus for the school, but also develop a school culture with a variety of student, parent, staff, and community backgrounds. Effective principals develop positive relationships based on mutual trust, respect, openness, support and understanding (Starrat, 1996). Jeanie Cash, a California National Distinguished Principal, describes characteristics central for good leaders (“What Good Leaders Do,” 1997). Good leaders can be more easily defined by looking at what they do, in contrast to what they are. Contrary to popular belief, good leaders are more than the “boss of the whole school” (p. 22).

Cash claims that school administrators are charged with two central duties: 1) increase student achievement, and 2) shape the school culture. All too often, these duties are
seen as separate objectives. Good leaders fuse achievement and culture, and follow practices that promote both. A good leader will first surround themselves with positive people. The process of opening a new school requires a staff that is open to change, willing to go the extra mile, and has the ability to see a variety of viewpoints. Max DePree (1989) writes that all of us want a workplace that has a work process and establishes relationships that meet our personal needs. Generally speaking, these needs include a sense of belonging, the ability to contribute, and performing meaningful work. Good leaders help create an atmosphere that supports these basic needs.

A good leader inspires teachers on a daily basis to believe that all students can succeed in spite of their circumstances. In many cases, opening new schools require that students be pulled from multiple existing sites and a variety of neighborhoods. This may create a situation where students from various socioeconomic backgrounds now attend the same school. In some cases, new schools become hubs for exceptional children programs or alternative learning centers. Good leaders are charged with hiring a staff that sees beyond individual student circumstances and maintains high standards of achievement for all students.

Finally, Cash insists that good leaders develop a sense of collaboration and creativity in the school. A good leader recognizes that every individual has special gifts and talents that he/she can offer to the school community. Capitalizing on the variety of talents, skills, and knowledge a newly created staff has to offer will be a great asset to a newly opened school and facilitate development of a positive school culture. New administrators can create a staff of personnel that brings creativity, technical skill, real-world experience, and
professional knowledge together. Working in an environment that promotes efficiency and productivity is rewarding, especially when staff members feel they have an opportunity to contribute to the overall school culture. However, principals must accept that even when they attempt to share power, some teachers will perceive them as being manipulative or directive (Blasé & Blasé, 2001).

In “The Rookies Playbook: Insights and Dirt for New Principals,” Autumn Tooms (2003) contends that no such magic “playbook” exists for new principals. According to Tooms, one reason such a manual does not exist is because there are no universal scenarios or dilemmas in today’s schools. Each situation a building level administrator faces is different because each principal, each school, and each district has its own personality and approach to a challenge. Experience is the best teacher for new administrators, coupled with a comprehensive assistant principalship. Only after years of experience and professional ups and downs will the new administrator have the knowledge to write the “playbook” they needed as a fledging administrator.

Developing a school culture is a significant and vitally important undertaking for a school leader. Effective leadership is crucial in facilitating the creation of a new culture among faculty, students, and the community. Bolman and Deal (2002) champion the cause of effective leadership through personal qualities that expand beyond any one leadership style, gender, or ethnicity. Effective leaders provide focus. Focus implies getting the whole group moving in a common direction. Every opportunity is used to promote and demonstrate the desired direction. Additionally, effective leaders are flexible enough to switch direction based on the ever-changing needs of the school community. Effective leaders have passion;
they care a great deal about their work and about making a difference. Those around the leader sense their passion; they wear it on their sleeve as a badge of courage. Either way, a leader’s passion is contagious, whether it’s there or not.

Wisdom accompanies the effective leader. A wise leader learns from every opportunity, be it a success or failure. Leadership requires courage and the willingness to make decisions that have long-term, lasting effects. Courage allows leaders to move forward even if the results of a decision are not immediately apparent. Finally, a leader must have integrity. According to Mike Krzyzewski (2000), “Guard your integrity as if it’s your most precious leadership possession, because that is what it is” (p. 233).

**Perceptions of Students and Schools**

Perceptions are reality. In new schools, how the students, staff, parents, administration and other stakeholders view the school, be it real or perceived, represents their reality of the school. The same can be said for students. How the student perceives themselves, and is perceived by their teachers, becomes the way the student sees themselves. As William Purkey (1978) points out, “Next to home, schools probably exact the single greatest influence on how students see themselves and abilities” (p. 28). As administrators and teachers prepare to open a school, attention must be given to creating positive and supportive self-images.

Teachers are charged with believing that students are able, valuable and self-directing. In schools that help create a positive self perception, teaching is a process of intentionally inviting students to see themselves in positive ways and to reach beyond their present performance. It is increasingly evident that the teacher’s perception of students, as
reflected in the teacher’s behavior, has the power to influence how students view themselves and how well they learn in school. Students develop best in the company of teachers who see them as people possessing relatively untapped abilities in myriad areas and who invite them to realize their potential (Purkey, 1978).

School policies, reflected by the quality of life found in schools, bear significant relationship to students’ self-esteem and student achievement. Students will elect to educate themselves in those aspects of schooling that they believe to be significant in their personal lives (Purkey, 1978). “By respecting students, and believing in their ability, value and self-directing powers, teachers can spend more energy and time in developing the most exciting environment for learning” (Purkey, 1978, p. 40). Moreover, students learn more in schools where their peers make academics the number one priority and hold high expectations for all students and where the climate supports adult, as well as student, learning (Murphy & Louis, 1999).

As part of the environment teachers choose, a decision must be made as to whether or not the school will most resemble a factory or a family. A factory school’s role is to mass produce a uniform product to the satisfaction of the consumer (public). Students have little control over the day to day operations and schedule of the school, let alone what is being taught or learned. Students are required to be obedient, conforming and most of all, busy. Student work emphasizes relatively basic skills that can be measured by standardized tests. A family school emphasizes mutual support and concern with the welfare of other group members. Decisions are made collectively and student learning takes priority to all other functions of the school. All stakeholders are a part of the educational family (Purkey, 1978).
New schools have a responsibility to the students who attend them to reflect a family setting.

**Professional Learning Communities and School Culture**

Developing culture from the ground up requires an administrator with a commitment to collaborative learning with the surrounding community, a clear sense of what the existing culture comprises, and the establishment of professional learning communities (DeFour, 2003; Nomura, 1999; Saunders, 1998). Unfortunately, teaching has evolved into a private endeavor that is rarely discussed among peers. Many teachers even lack the basic language for such discussions. However, friendships and interpersonal support teachers give each other support collective efforts to improve educational practice (Murphy & Louis, 1999). Establishing positive relationships in schools “provide the means for the communication of tasks and roles to individuals and groups” (Blumenreich, 2005, p. 155). Therefore, the best way to improve schools is for schools to function as professional learning communities.

Under this system, teachers work in collaborative teams, and the emphasis is not on what teachers teach, but on what students learn. One of the immediate benefits of professional learning communities is a reduction in teacher isolation. If teachers work in collaborative communities, however, the degree or autonomy they give up should be offset by a shared sense of purpose and by opportunities to learn from other teachers’ strengths and experiences (Barlow, 2005, pp. 64 - 65). More and more observers of schools are proposing that norms of collaboration be used among teachers that deprivatize practice and create opportunities for peers to learn from each other (Murphy and Louis, 1999).

A primary concept of professional learning communities is that teachers, working in groups, should study relatively short-term cycles of teaching and learning, borrow and
generate ideas for improving practice, put them in action, and study the results. As student learning improves “people’s actions and attitudes change dramatically, and the change spreads like a contagion” (Joyce, 2004, p. 78). Within these groups, teachers have on-going communication about how to use teaching time in the most meaningful manner (Branch, 2003). Ideally, the professional learning community has been built through a process of deliberation. This process enables stakeholders to share assumptions, values, beliefs, and mental images. Relying on consensus, a common understanding is developed through exposing educational platform and developing a shared system of working principles and beliefs (Andrews & Lewis, 2002).

Incorporating a professional learning community in a school has far-reaching implications not only for the school, but for the community at large. Many schools see an improved relationship with the school’s broader community. Schools that incorporate professional learning community are often viewed as an “innovative school” within the community. Perceptions of the school from community members, as well as teachers at the school, are improved. School and community goals become aligned as the relationship between the two grows and develops. As one teacher shares “we have started to look at what is important to us and our community and our kids and what it is going to look like in the future so we can give them the skills to get there or to adapt to the change that is happening” (Andrews & Lewis, 2002, p. 250).

Laserik Saunders, principal of Serra High School, located in San Diego, California, describes his quest to establish a true learning environment that involves the community. In his seven-step approach, Saunders identifies strategies that both the school and surrounding
community had collective involvement in developing. Key elements include: creating a shared vision, providing structure in developing specific outcomes, designing a curriculum with feedback from the community based on their needs, involving constituents to allow them to take responsibility and assume leadership roles, continually assess performance, provide on-going professional development, and nurture an inclusive school culture. As new administrators face the challenges of opening a new facility, Saunders’ suggestions provide a foundation for involving the surrounding community in creating a positive school culture.

Richard DeFour’s “Building a Professional Learning Community” (2003) challenges administrators to establish professional learning communities at their schools. These communities build on the premise that in order to achieve consensus and move forward with specific initiatives the entire faculty does not have to agree on the initiative. Rather, everyone in the group agrees on two important criteria: 1) all points of view have been heard, and 2) the will of the group is evident, even to those who most oppose the initiative. Once those two criteria are met, the group has arrived at consensus. From this point, it is the leader’s responsibility to make sure everyone in the group understands the expectation that all members of the group are to fully cooperate with the initiative.

Professional learning communities then focus on the following three concepts:

1 – **A Focus on Learning** – Student success is the focal point of all professional activities. What is it we want all students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when a student is not learning?
2 – **Collaborative Teams** – Every professional member would be a member of a team and the focus of the team is to be on student learning. Each team should have a specific measurable goal related to student achievement.

3 – **Teacher teams focused on results** – Teachers are in a better position to analyze the day-to-day workings of schools and the effectiveness of instructional strategies. Teacher involvement is crucial for raising student performance.

Applied to the concept of a newly opened school, DeFour’s outline for a professional learning community addresses numerous topics. First and foremost, the definition of “consensus” will streamline meetings. The idea of everyone not agreeing on a specific initiative in order to achieve consensus is uncommon for most. However, this interpretation will save countless hours during faculty and community interest meetings when discussing school colors, mascots, and school supplies.

Additionally, within the parameters of the professional learning community, the focus always lies with student learning. Even if a faculty member disagrees with a specific initiative, it is doubtful he or she will disagree with decisions based on student learning. The professional learning community also helps the new administrator provide a structure for staff teams. Whereas the focus will remain on student learning, the individual teams are open to a variety of applications. Teams can be built on academic teams, subject areas, or even school-wide interests. The guiding principal remains the same; its application is flexible. Michael Fullan (1992) recognizes the long-term impact of professional learning communities in schools - “principals would do more lasting good if they concentrated on
building collaborative cultures rather than charging forcefully in with heavy agendas for change” (p. 19).

**Summary**

The challenge of building and establishing school culture at newly opened schools is a monumental task. Districts must recruit highly motivated leaders that possess a variety of leadership and interpersonal skills. Principals are managers, teachers, instructional leaders, coaches, counselors, parents, and friends, all at the same time. The job description continues to grow as resources frequently diminish. Administrators at new schools are charged with the initial task of hiring qualified staff, involving the community in the decision-making process, and creating a professional learning community that promotes collaboration and student achievement. Additionally, administrators at new schools have the responsibility of being the guiding force behind the establishment of a school culture that will guide the direction of the schools for years to come. The principalship is not for the faint of heart, particularly if it involves the opening of a new school.

Current research on school culture is very clear in the role of the principal in building and establishing culture in any school. Above any other aspect of the school, the principal determines the school’s culture, be it positive or negative (Berger, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Rosenblum & Jastrzab, 1998). In order to develop a school culture conducive to teaching and learning, the principal must build relationships with students, staff and the community, provide a very clear focus and direction for the school, and provide staff members an opportunity for collaboration and professional development. Meeting these criteria is the basic charge for any principal opening a new school. Only through careful planning,
organization and team-building activities can a principal of a new school hope to accomplish the monumental task of creating a school culture supportive of student achievement and teacher empowerment.
Chapter 3
Methodology

“Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books.”

- Dwight Conquergood (Turning Points in Qualitative Research)

Introduction

Examining the process of opening new schools and the conscious and unconscious acts required to establish a positive school culture requires a close examination of the people responsible. In order to truly understand the process, we must truly understand the individual – what they think, feel, believe, how they analyze and process information, what they deem as important or unimportant, and what are the major influences in their lives. Given current understanding and purposes of quantitative and qualitative research, qualitative research methods lend itself to the study of building and establishing culture in newly opened schools (Sarason, 1996).

Research Design of the Study

In accordance with guidelines from North Carolina State University, all Internal Review Board (IRB) policies and procedures were strictly adhered to. Pseudonyms were used for the names or all of the participants, as well as the school district. Participants of the study were employed principals in the Smith County Public Schools System. Each participant served as the principal of a newly opened school within the district. Four schools were selected – two elementary schools and two middle schools. Based on access to participants who have opened a new school in Smith County, only elementary and middle
schools were selected for this study. All participants were the current principal of the school he/she opened.

Participants represented a sample of administrators from Smith County Schools. The research sample was comprised of two women (one white and one African American) and two men (both white). All participants served as an assistant principal in the district before assuming a principalship. The schools were opened for a various amount of years: elementary (6), elementary (first year), middle school (3) and middle school (1). Each participant was interviewed individually to discuss the specific strategies, procedures, and protocol the principal employed to help build school culture at his/her site. Additionally, a focus group interview involving all participants was conducted in order to generate a dialogue between the participants to share their experiences and knowledge.

A brief composite of each school is provided below:

**East View Elementary, Principal Ted Jones:**

Opened in 2000, this school enrolled approximately 800 students in K-5 (enrolled 500 in opening year) during the 2007 – 2008 school year; employed 54 certified staff and 35 classified staff; student demographics > 80 % white, 7% Black, 8% Hispanic, 4% Multiracial, 0.3% Asian, 0.6% Native American; in 2007 -2008 East View Elementary made High Growth, was a School of Distinction, but did not meet all AYP goals.

**Pine Bluff Elementary, Principal Tom Martin:**

Opened in 2006, this school enrolled approximately 890 students in K-5 (enrolled 800 in opening year) during the 2007 – 2008 school year; employed 69 certified staff and 37 classified staff; student demographics > 78 % white, 8% Black, 8% Hispanic,
5% Multiracial, 0.5% Asian, 0.5% Native American; in 2007-2008 Pine Bluff Elementary made High Growth, was a School of Distinction, and met all AYP goals.

Shady Creek Middle School, Principal Susan Johnson:

Opened in 2003, this school enrolled approximately 766 students in 6 – 8 (enrolled 550 in opening year) during the 2007 – 2008 school year; employed 57 certified staff and 18 classified staff; student demographics > 72.7% white, 10.6% Black, 12.7% Hispanic, 3.1% Multiracial, 0.3% Asian, 0.7% Native American; in 2006-2007, did not met all AYP goals, in 2007 – 2008 Shady Creek Middle School made High Growth, was a School of Progress, but did not meet all AYP goals.

Glenn Dale Middle School, Principal Fran Jackson:

Opened in 2007, this school enrolled approximately 705 students in 6 – 8 during the 2007 – 2008 school year; employed 44 certified staff and 19 classified staff; student demographics > 67% white, 15.6% Black, 14% Hispanic, 2.6% Multiracial, < 0.1% Asian, 0.8% Native American; in 2007-2008 Glenn Dale Middle School made Expected Growth, was a School of Progress, but did not meet all AYP goals.

Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative research lends itself to in-depth methods that focus on “watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms” (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996, p. 547). Qualitative research can be defined as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell,
Similarly, Worthen (1997) indicates that qualitative research reflects: 1) research conducted in a natural setting, 2) the researcher as the chief “instrument” in both data collecting and analysis, 3) emphasizes “thick description,” 4) a focus on social processes rather than outcomes, 5) multiple data gathering methods, and 6) an inductive approach to data analysis.

In a sense, qualitative researchers function as historians. They rely on many possible sources of data and use a variety of methods – observations, participant observations, interviews, documents, artifacts and personal reflection. Qualitative researchers “need to be direct and honest with themselves in identifying biases, ideology, stance, and intent” (Janesick, 2004, p. 106). It is important to realize, however, that the qualitative researcher cannot be everyone at once or engage in every possible viewpoint at the same time (Wolcott, 2001). The historian as qualitative researcher must choose a point of view (Janesick, 2004).

Qualitative data is a reflection of words rather than numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is normally “rich” and complex in nature (Richards, 1999). Data gathered in a qualitative setting provides well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of process in identifiable local contexts. A chronological flow emerges from qualitative data, as the researcher can see what events led to what consequences and derive explanations of the sequence of events. The use of qualitative data helps researchers to get beyond initial conceptions and generate or revise their conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative researchers are not as concerned with behaviors as they are with actions, which carry their intentions and meanings and lead to consequences (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
However, all qualitative research is concerned with understanding the meanings individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives (Hatch, 2002).

Qualitative research reflects an understanding of the meaning individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives. While conducting research, qualitative researchers recognize that individuals adopt the values and perspectives of their social groups. This reflects the individual’s view of what is deemed important and what is not (Zou & Trueba, 2002). Lived experiences of real people in real settings are the objects of qualitative studies. Researchers want to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it. Qualitative studies try to capture the perspective that participants use as a basis for their actions in a specific social setting. The researcher seeks to answer the questions, “What is happening here?” and “What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?” In qualitative work, the intent is to explore human behaviors within the contexts of their natural occurrence (Hatch, 2002).

Capturing what insiders take for granted is one of the objectives of qualitative research. Researchers try to understand the perspectives of their participants; any element that is perceived to be important by the participant is important to the study. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative studies argue that there is no direct relationship between the number of participants and the quality of the study (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative researchers do not accept the misconception that more data means a better or richer analysis (Janesick, 2004). The contexts of the study are carefully described so that readers can make their own judgments about the applicability of the results to their own contexts and understanding (Hatch, 2002).
Participants are the ultimate gatekeepers of information in any qualitative study. They determine whether or not, and to what extent, the researcher will have access to the desired information. Building good working relationships is the responsibility of the researcher; researchers should also develop and implement a plan to help participants learn how to be studied (Hatch, 2002). Researchers are charged with being honest with gatekeepers about their research goals and objectives.

Qualitative researchers have a more vested interest in their research than is found in many other research methods. Since qualitative research is “tentative, problematic, and ever-changing” (Janesick, 2004, p. 10), the researcher’s commitment exceeds an examination of numbers, facts, and figures. Many qualitative researchers see their research as participatory, dialogic, transformative, and educative, requiring self-evaluation, both externally and internally (Janesick, 2004). Qualitative researchers look at not only the people who are participating in the study and their beliefs and behaviors, but they are required to examine the researcher’s own orientation and purposes (Janesick, 2004).

Narrative Studies

Within the construct of qualitative research, narrative studies – based on the notion that humans make sense of their lives through stories (Hatch, 2002) - lend themselves to the study of new schools. Narratives are “a complex social process, a form of social action that embodies the relation between the narrator and culture” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 273). Narratives share the fundamental interest in making sense of experiences and the interest in constructing and communicating meaning (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Through the use of a
communicative format, narratives organize representations and explanations of personal and social experiences (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Narrative studies “focus on gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to describe their lives” (Hatch, 2002, p. 28). Examples of narrative studies include life stories, life stories research, biography, personal experience methods, oral history, and narrative inquiry. Data for narrative studies can be generated through annuals and chronicles, family stories, photographs, memory boxes, interviews, journals, autobiographical writing, letters, conversations, and field notes (Hatch, 2002). Narrative writing demonstrates a style that is personal, familiar, “up close,” highly readable, friendly, and applied to a broad audience. It provides a level of detail that makes the work come alive. The writing seems “real,” transporting the reader directly into the world of the study (Creswell, 1998).

Narratives can be viewed as three separate events, including “how everything started, how things developed and what became of these events” (Flick, 2002, p. 96). After each of these events, the same question is continually asked, “And then what happened?” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 230). However, there is an assumption that a narrative allows researchers to gain access to factual experiences and events. What is presented to the researcher in a narrative constructed in a specific frame of reference may not be the same sequence of events that actually occurred. Additionally, memories of earlier events may be influenced by the situation in which they are retold (Flick, 2002). Narratives are an interpretation and therefore require interpretation (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Narratives are the best way to represent and understand experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Powerful narratives may: 1) compel or recruit the reader’s willing
attention, 2) lead the reader to reflect, 3) involve the reader personally, and 4) transform, move, shake, or move the reader (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003). The use of narrative allows researchers to approach the participant’s experiential world in a more comprehensive way. The interviewer’s task is to lead the informant to tell the story of the area of interest as a consistent story of all relevant events from beginning to end (Flick, 2002). Narration presents details, context, emotion, and the works of social relationships. It evokes emotionality and self-feelings. Through narrative, the feelings, actions, and meanings of interested individuals are heard (Creswell, 1998).

Narratives are a less dominating and more relational mode of gathering data. Narratives reflect and respect the participant’s way of organizing meaning in their lives. As a form of storytelling, narratives relay what researchers do when they describe the research and clinical materials, as well as what participants do when they convey the details and describe their experiences. Narratives are a relational and collaborative activity that encourages others to listen, to share, and to empathize. Tellers and listeners interact in a particular cultural and historical context, which is essential to interpretation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Personal narratives, simply described as “talk organized around consequential events” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 219), serve many purposes – to remember, urge, convince, engage, or entertain their audiences. The order of events in a narrative moves in a linear way through time. The order cannot be changed without changing the inferred sequence of events. One event will always cause another in a narrative, although the link may not be chronological (Huberman & Miles, 2002).
Narratives are laced with social discourses and perceived relations, which do not remain constant over time. There is no reason to assume that an individual’s narrative will, or should, be entirely consistent from one setting to the next (Huberman & Miles, 2002). When telling about lives, people lie, forget, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Naturally, narratives do not reveal the past as it actually happened. Most narratives give the researcher the truth of the participant’s experiences. Personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. Researchers must interpret the “truth” in order to understand it (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

How the narrator relates their story, and in what context the narration is shared, is as equally important as the story itself. Something said in a whisper, after a long pause, has a different importance than the same words said loudly without a pause. Narrators use elongated vowels, emphasis, pitch, repetition, and other devices to indicate what is important. The level of emotion involved in the retelling of a personal narrative projects a sense of meaning and purpose in the story being shared (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Narration is a complex social and communicative process. It is a form of social action that embodies the relationship between the narrator and their culture. Researchers must direct their attention to the process of embodiment. Additionally, we must examine what the narrator accomplished as they tell their stories and how that relationship is shaped culturally (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). In articulating other’s stories, we need to attend to what may be culturally problematic in the story and what may produce difficulties and complexities. These difficulties and complexities may produce silences, gaps, disruptions, or
contradictions. Inviting people to share their stories requires more than a good life story. It requires reiterating the invitation throughout the interview (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).

**Interviews in Narrative Studies**

In most cases, personal narratives are shared through an interview process (Huberman & Miles, 2002). As administrators shared their own narratives on the process, trials, and tribulations of opening a new school and their efforts to establish a positive school culture, interviews are a major source of data. Interviewing provides a means for doing what is very difficult to do any other way – finding out what is in and on someone else’s mind (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative researchers strive to elicit stories from participants. They invite others to tell their stories, encouraging them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk. Questions during interviews should be phrased in everyday, not technical, language. The primary focus of the interview is to ask about the participant’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings. The relationships constructed with interviewees directly affect the quality of the responses to our questions (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).

Interviewing has five basic outcomes (Hatch, 2002, pp. 91 – 92):

1) **Here and now constructiveness** – participants’ explanations of events, activities, feelings, motivations and concerns
2) **Reconstruction** – explanations of past events and experiences
3) **Projections** – explanations of anticipated experiences
4) **Triangulation** – verification or extension of information from other sources
5) **Member-checking** – verification or extension of information developed by the researcher

Triangulation can be further defined as “examining the consistency of results from different sources and methods for measuring the same construct. When different methods or information from different sources result in similar findings, their convergence adds to the strength of the results” (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997, p. 391). Artifacts will play a key role in the triangulation process. Examining PTA/PTO documents and meeting minutes, Advisory Council meeting minutes, minutes from faculty meetings, district sponsored surveys administered to students, parents and staff, and other relevant documentation and artifacts will be an important aspect of the research study. The researcher will be able to gain insight into the actual workings of the school, as well as gauge whether or not the perceptions of the principal are consistent with the perceptions of the schools’ stakeholders.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews throughout the research process. Semi-structured interviews are conversations that do not provide the primary data source. They “provide opportunities to ask participants to explain their perspectives or what the researcher has observed” (Hatch, 2002, p. 92). Semi-structured interviews require the researcher to create pertinent questions on the spot. Researchers are charged with making sure participants understand that the semi-structured conversation is a part of the data collection process (Hatch, 2002).

Structured interviews are another interviewing technique. During a structured interview, it is clear the researcher is “in charge” of leading the interview. A set time for the interview is established, and more often than not the interview is recorded. Structured
interviews provide an in-depth look into the area being studied; participants are asked to look deeply into their understandings. Unlike semi-structured interviews, structured interviews are planned events that take place away from the research scene for the explicit purpose of gathering information from an informant. Frequently, structured interviews are used when the interview is the only source of data (Hatch, 2002). A third type of interview is the standardized interview. Standardized interviews require that the researcher enter the interview with a set of predetermined questions that are asked in the same order, using the same language, to several participants. Standardized interviews allow the researcher to gather information on a topic of interest from numerous sources and then compile it systematically (Hatch, 2002).

Whereas observation is “the act of taking notice of something, interviewing is an act of communication” (Janesick, 2004, p. 71). Interviewing is a meeting of two people to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses. The result is communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic (Janesick, 2004). Once the interview is complete, the researcher practices developing categories from the data, looking for points of tension and conflict, focusing on making sense of the data. Attention must be given to the people who participate in the study, as well as the researcher’s own orientation and purposes (Janesick, 2004).

Researchers think of interviews as filling in the gaps of their own work and expanding their knowledge of the particular area of study. Questions must be specific, but also expand beyond the immediate intentions of the research. Interviewers must spend time establishing rapport, building up to the central issues and understanding their context in the
interviewee’s life. Researchers are cautioned not to dismiss other areas of interviewee’s lives or extraneous topics that develop in the interview. These “unnecessary” discussions may be very relevant to the participant and therefore warrant the researcher’s attention (Ritchie, 1995).

While conducting an interview, a combination of open-ended and specific questions is most effective. Participants are able to discuss what they feel is most significant before narrowing the topic. Open-ended questions allow participants to speculate on matters and include all of the material that they think is relevant to the subject. Additionally, open-ended questions are seen as a means of empowering the participant. They encourage the participant to relate and interpret their own stories. Participants can actively shape the course of the interview rather than responding passively. More specific questions can be used to elicit factual information. Specific questions are usually used in response to a comment or thought expressed by the participant (Ritchie, 1995).

Subjectivity Statement

Trying to define my beliefs, values, ethics and the essence of “Todd” has proven to be challenging. I like who I am, who I have become. I don’t always think about “me,” let alone write about “me”. I see myself as a student, educator, advisor, son, brother, uncle, and friend. I have had successful experiences in most of these roles, and not-so-successful experiences in a few of these roles. The idea that I can learn by reflecting on my experiences keeps me going – no one expects me to be perfect (except for me!).

I was drawn to education as a young child due to the fact that I experienced difficulty in school. Two teachers in elementary school, both men, influenced my decision to become a
teacher. Through their patience, understanding, and attention (not to mention an older brother who continues to be a guiding principle in my life) I finally began to experience success in school. I want to be able to help other kids who had similar experiences in school. I feel that my eyes and ears are more open, my heart more understanding, and my brain more patient from my own experiences in school. No matter what title I hold, I hope to always be considered a “teacher”. I can think of no greater compliment a person can receive than to have someone call them “my teacher”.

My philosophical stance and belief system in regard to education is rather simple: a) all children should have the opportunity to learn to the best of their ability, b) schools must build relationships with their partners (parents, communities, etc.), and c) a student has a right to leave public school with the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in the world they enter, be it college/university, vocational/technical school, the military, or the work force. I become frustrated with parents who, even in elementary school, push students to go to college or university. It is a fact of life that not all kids will be successful in college/university, nor that all kids want to go to college/university. Educators and parents need to realize that the true goal of school is to prepare the student to be successful in life, be it as an engineer, teacher, soldier, plumber, or landscaper. Parents and teacher should encourage students to “live up to their potential”. However, realistic goals should be determined and all stakeholders should work towards the common good of the student.

I consider the education system the cornerstone of our society and culture. Every act, every action, every job and job skill requires that someone play the role of teacher and someone play the role of student. My father, a retired NCO in the Army, spent several years
in the military as a drill instructor. Not until I began my teaching career and the two of us discussed my daily tasks and interactions with students did my dad begin to see himself as a teacher. I suspect this is a common occurrence in the private sector. Seldom do we hear any recognition for the doctor’s best teacher, or the law school professor, or an engineer’s mentor or advisor in college. Many professionals would have you believe the role of teacher is nonexistent in their field. And that’s a shame.

I am a teacher who currently serves as my district’s School Improvement Coordinator. I consider myself a good person who enjoys helping others. I am a life-long student, both in life and higher education. Everyday I enter the greatest classroom of all, a public school. My best teachers are not always a professor or even a peer. The most meaningful lessons I have learned have come from the most meaningful people – my students.

As I reflect on my role as researcher in this study, I recognize that there may be several biases I have to address. First and foremost, I participated in the opening of a new school as an assistant principal several years ago. I must recognize the impact of my own personal experiences during the research and not allow my own successes (and failures) to color the research. Second, I know the participants of the study in a professional capacity, many for several years. The relationships I have established with these administrators have the potential to skew my analysis of the data, as well as what is reported. I must develop a trusting relationship with the participants that will enable them to be honest and forth coming with me. Additionally, I must maintain their professional integrity and reputations, regardless of what the data reveals. Lastly, I have a vested interest in the research as an
administrator in Smith County. It is my responsibility to ensure that the research findings are applicable not only to my own district, but also to districts across the state and country.

**Data Analysis**

Data was closely analyzed to look for common themes as they emerged from the interviews. Interviews, in the form of personal narratives, were recorded in order to provide an accurate reference of the data. Initially, interviews were scheduled for one, one hour session. However, additional time was allowed for interviews if the participants needed more time to answer questions or wanted to elaborate on the topic of opening a new school. The interviewer scheduled interviews and determined a location to conduct the interview based on the needs of the participants. Additionally, a focus group interview involving all participants was conducted after each individual interview was completed.

The researcher must keep in mind that meaning in a personal narrative can sometimes be ambiguous. Since the narrative evolves out of a process of interaction between people – self, teller, listeners, and recorder – every participant may not have the required background knowledge to fully understand what is being shared. Although the goal may be to tell a truthful and accurate account, a researcher’s narrative about another narrative is subject to interpretation (Huberman & Miles, 2002). Narratives do not “speak for themselves” or “provide direct access to other times, places, or cultures” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 235).

Analysis of the data must also be kept separate from the interpretation of the data. Analysis falls more on the scientific side of things, interpretation on the humanistic side. Referring to the examination of data using systematic and standardized measures and procedures, analysis has a more limited, more precise and more clearly defined role.
Interpretation is not derived from rigorous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, but from the researcher’s efforts at sense making. This is a human activity that includes intuition, past experiences and emotions. Interpretation invited the examination, the “pondering” of data in terms of what people make of it. It is only through the examination of data that data takes on meaning (Wolcott, 2001).

Transcriptions of the interviews were prepared by an outside service. Once transcriptions were completed, interviews were closely reviewed. The constant comparison method was used to analyze the data (Miles and Huberman, 2002). The interviewer first listened to the tapes by themselves, listening for inflections, what the interviewee said, and what the interviewee did not say. Then, in order to code the data, the interviewer read the transcription and listened to the recordings simultaneously. By conducting individual interviews, the researcher was afforded a strong handle of what “real-life” is like. The use of thick description – “data pulled from participants that produces for readers the feeling that they experience, or perhaps could experience, the events described” (Creswell, 1998, p. 184) – generated richness and holism in the research. The reader experienced data that is vivid, nested in a real context, and has a ring of truth about it. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, interviewing is fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Validity can be described simply as whether or not a researcher sees what he or she thinks they see in the research. In some cases, problems arise between the link of what are actually being studied and the version provided to the researcher. The researcher must
determine if the phenomena would be the same whether or not he or she was there to observe it (Flick, 2002). External validity measures the extent to which the findings of the study are applicable to other groups (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003). For the purpose of this study, validity will be assessed in terms of if the participants have indeed followed the practices and procedures they have shared with the researcher.

Reliability is the extent to which a study can be replicated (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003). When examining the role of administrators in building a positive school culture, many of the basic practices of the research can be duplicated in other school settings. What cannot be replicated are the specific circumstances and conditions of the study, including: growth patterns of the district, construction schedules for opening new schools, staffing considerations, and the personal attributes and characteristics of the participants.

Coding data is a crucial step when interpreting the research findings. Coded data must be analyzed in order to determine what data will be relevant to the research and therefore integrated into the study. Coding “includes the constant comparison of phenomena, cases, concepts, and the formulation of questions” (Flick, 2003, p. 178). Questioning does not stop at the end of the interview; the researcher must continually ask him/herself questions to determine how the data is related. These questions, combined with open coding (expressing data and phenomena in the form of concepts), generated central themes in the research.

**Limitations of the Study**

A major difficulty in any qualitative study lies in the ability of the study to be generalized to other situations. Additionally, ethical problems can arise if the identity of the
organization or the individual participants is disclosed without his/her approval (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Given the setting of the research (the researcher’s home district), maintaining confidentiality of the participants may be difficult. Another limitation of the study is reflected in the personal predisposition or biases of the researcher. As a professional peer, former classmate and, in some cases, friend, of the participants, maintaining a high level of objectivity was crucial for the researcher. According to Zou & Trueba (2002), “researchers must be honest about their own subjectivity and not let evaluative claims interfere with what is observed” (p. 119). An additional limitation of the studies lies in the fact that the sample size was relatively small, and all of the participants were employed in the same district.

The limited use of triangulation must also be addressed. Triangulation, a data analysis process that cross-checks and cross-references data, is effective in determining the accuracy of the data. Given that participants are sharing their own personal experiences, practices, and beliefs, triangulation has a limited role in the data analysis. Participants may perceive that they followed a specific course of action, involved critical stakeholders, or practiced shared decision-making when in reality they did not. In the absence of triangulation, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what actually took place and what was perceived to have taken place by the participants.

Summary

Qualitative research techniques are interested in getting to the meanings and understandings, real and/or implied, of how people make sense of their surroundings. When examining how individuals build and establish positive school culture at newly opened schools, an understanding of the individual responsible is crucial. We must learn who the
complete person is. School or district-generated data or reports from meetings are not useful data sources for such a study. In order to get an in-depth, detailed description of the entire person, the use of interviews to generate personal narratives is required. Participants must have an opportunity to share their story, the details of the journey that led them to where they are at today. Through careful examination of their personal narratives, the lived experiences of participants came to light. By analyzing this “thick description,” the researcher was able to see common trends and themes emerge from the narratives. These trends and themes, both the positive and not so positive, can then be applied to assist administrators around the country as they face the monumental task of opening a new school.
Chapter 4
Findings

“When I think of school culture, (it’s) the way we do things around here; the way we conduct business; the way we treat people. It is the level of honesty and integrity and inclusiveness that the school has.”

- Elementary School Principal

Introduction

The research questions previously discussed were answered through the use of narrative analysis. Interviews with the four participants took place in a variety of locations and times, as each individual participant was able to select a location and time that best fit their schedule. All interviews were recorded and the focus group interview was recorded and video taped. Two of the individual interviews took place after school, while the other two individual interviews took place on Saturday mornings. Interviews were held in the principals’ offices, a conference room, and even in a fast food restaurant. The length of the interviews also varied from one hour to one hour and 45 minutes. The focus group interview was held at the elementary school in which the researcher previously worked because it was centrally located for the participants. The focus group interview lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes. One participant, the principal of Pine Bluff Elementary, completed his individual interview, but was unable to participate in the focus group interview due to an unexpected family emergency.

The participants were asked a variety of questions during the interviews (see Appendix A), which were designed to provide answers to the basic research questions - What are the central elements required in the planning, establishment, and building of a school
culture? Who are the stakeholders that should be involved, and to what extent? How does an administrator’s personal belief system impact the vision of the school? The findings of the study are presented as direct excerpts from the individual and focus group interviews. Additionally, requests for artifacts related to the opening of the schools (artifacts - PTA/O documents, advisory council minutes, test scores, teacher absentee/tturnover rates, minutes from the first faculty meeting) were made to the four participants. However, these materials were not made available to the researcher.

Participants

Each of the four participants arrived at their current positions through a variety of career pathways. Two of the participants entered education through what would be described as non-traditional routes; the other two participants arrived at their positions through more traditional means. The principal of East View Elementary School, Ted Jones, taught elementary school and special education for over 15 years before entering administration. After serving as an assistant principal at a neighboring school for seven years, he was named the principal of East View Elementary School when it opened in 2000. He has been the principal of East View Elementary School ever since.

The principal of Pine Bluff Elementary School, Tom Martin, also pursued a more traditional career path to the principalship. After completing his bachelor’s degree in elementary education at East Carolina University, he started teaching kindergarten in a local school district. Before leaving that district, he also taught first grade there. Moving to Smith County, North Carolina, he began teaching fourth grade. Encouraged by his principal to look into leadership positions including the principalship, he decided to go back to school to earn
a master’s degree in school administration. Upon graduating from North Carolina State University, he became an assistant principal at the same school where he taught. Working at this school for two years, he transferred to another elementary school in Smith County. Having an opportunity to open up a new school as an assistant principal, he made another move and worked at the new school for about half a year. At that time, he was offered his first principalship at another school in the district. He stayed at that school for two years when the opportunity came to open Pine Bluff Elementary School. He is currently in his second year as principal of Pine Bluff Elementary School.

Susan Johnson, principal of Shady Creek Middle School, started her career as a lateral entry teacher and taught eighth grade social studies for seven years. At that time she decided, “I wanted to do something different so I applied for (and was awarded) the Principal’s Fellows Scholarship.” Graduating from Fayetteville State University, she began her administrative career as an assistant principal intern at a middle school. After she completed her internship, a high school position became available. Serving as the Assistant principal for curriculum and instruction for five years, she was named the principal of Shady Creek Middle School in 2003.

The principal of Glenn Dale Middle School arrived at her position through more non-traditional means. As a self-proclaimed, “non-traditional college student,” her road to the principalship started as a substitute teacher. As Fran Jackson shares, “I went to college for the first time when I was thirty. I wanted to stay home with my children before I did a career.” While at home with her children, she started to do some substitute teaching. Discovering that she really enjoyed and loved being around students, a teaching career
entered her mind. She went back to school and earned a teaching degree in secondary mathematics ("because that was my favorite subject in school"). Graduating in the fall of 1992, there were no high school math jobs available in the district, so she took a middle school job at a K-8 school. After one year there, she transferred to a local high school. While teaching there, another teacher at the school told her about the North Carolina Principal Fellows program. Discussing the program, and the jump to administration, with several local principals, she decided to apply for the scholarship. As she explains, “I was not in favor of (the North Carolina Principal Fellows) the program at the time but thought about it and talked to a couple of principals and they said they really felt like they had a greater impact on the children if you were a good administrator. So I decided I would apply for Principal Fellows and if I got it, I would do it and if I didn’t, I would remain in the classroom because I loved teaching. I didn’t leave the classroom because I was unhappy, I loved teaching.”

Upon receiving the North Carolina Principal Fellows Scholarship, she attended East Carolina University and worked for five and one-half years as an assistant principal at a local middle school. Promoted to the principalship at a K-8 school in the middle of the year, she was there one full calendar year. Then, in the spring of 2007, she was given the opportunity to open Glenn Dale Middle School.

**Defining School Culture**

The definition of culture means different things to different people. As such, the culture at one school can, and often is, vastly different compared the culture at a neighboring school. Participants in the study each have their own spin on what culture means to them and their schools. All agree, however, that a successful school must have a positive school
culture. The principal of East View Elementary School states, “When I think of school culture ….. it is the way we do things around here, the way we conduct business, the way we treat people. It is the level of honesty and integrity and inclusiveness that the school has.” As he points out, the dynamics of culture changes over time as new people join the staff at a school. Mr. Jones explains that having enough “standard barriers in place help teach the new people how to come onboard.” Through this informal exchange of the school’s culture and norms, new staff members get acclimated to expectations from the administration, other staff members, and the community in general.

The principal of East View Elementary is very clear that “we certainly have a culture in our school of high expectations.” Having a student demographic that reflects a higher socioeconomic background than the majority of the district’s elementary schools (less than 15% of the students attending East View Elementary receive free/reduced lunch), he recognizes that the students who attend his school come to school “with a lot of advantages.” The staff, however, still maintains high expectations of the students and work hard to challenge them. The change in the student demographic at East View Elementary has happened recently (over the 8 year span of the school being open, the current level of 15% of students receiving free/reduced lunch is the highest the school has seen). The principal of East View Elementary recognizes that the demographics of the students will continue to change over time and helping veteran teachers accept this change is going to be a challenge.

According to Mr. Jones, “I would say the biggest challenge that we have at ……… is sometimes for the people who have been there the longest, they struggle with the child that doesn’t fit into the round hole and rather than comparing them to children of that grade level
in general compared to children in that grade level at (our school), they sometimes jump to
the conclusion that the child must be special ed or have some kind of disability when the
truth is the child has just had a lot of hard knocks early in life that haven’t given them the
advantages that the other children have and so we have to work through the assistance team
and with the assistance of the special ed teacher, the guidance counselor, to help them to see
that this child is just going to require a lot more work but that there is no disability involved,
it just is that they did not have that pre-school learning that so many of our children did.
They have not been exposed to books, and they have not been exposed to any kind of
organized educational function.”

The staff of East View Elementary School continues to demonstrate a culture
supportive of teachers and staff, particularly for new staff members. Two specific incidents
reflect the support provided to teachers at the school: “We have had lots of tragedy in our
school over the eight years that we have been there. Since we have been there we have had a
teacher whose husband was killed in an automobile accident, we have had a bus wreck that
involved all of our chorus….while none of those children were badly injured….it was a very
scary time for all of us because we had about 20 plus children transported to the hospital and
no one knew how that was going to turn out and the entire staff that was left back at the
school just jumped right in and filled all the gaps that were left by those of us who were at
the accident scene and the hospital. So it is a very supportive culture and the veteran teachers
that I have really reach out in trying to help those new teachers that come in and make them
feel included and a part of our school.”
At Pine Bluff Elementary School, in their third year of operation, a culture of its own is starting to take shape. Tom Martin, principal of Pine Bluff Elementary School, views the culture of the school as being directly correlated to the long-and short-term goals, vision, and mission of the school. Culture at Pine Bluff Elementary School can be described as “The way we do things, in using terms, culture defines so many things within the school. Obviously you have to have a vision as to where you see your school in years to come, and a mission and goals, values that people believe in…in order to obtain those goals but culture goes into the beliefs of the leader and the individual staff members of that school. Beliefs as far as how things should be done, how the school should be run, what is it going to take to get us to the level of greatness that we inspire to be.”

As with East View Elementary School, the culture of Pine Bluff Elementary School is rooted in high standards and student achievement. According to Mr. Martin, “culture is something that is hard to describe but it is easy to see. If you sat down and asked someone what is the school’s culture at (our school), I would imagine that might be difficult for someone to put into words because it is so many things that define culture. You may get different thoughts from different people as far as specific type of things but the big thing is that what is visible here at (Pine Bluff Elementary School). Things like the Professional Learning Communities where we believe that continuous learning is something not just for students but for staff and that we can learn best through others and that we believe in it so much that we are going to make sure that it occurs regardless of the obstacles that we face.”

The principal of Shady Creek Middle School has a more concise explanation of the culture at her school. As Susan Johnson explains, “What comes to mind to me is an
accumulation of the best of every person in that building. The school takes on the culture of the teachers’ attitude about children, about school as well as the culture of that community. When I think of a culture that is what I think of.” Along with both of the elementary principals, Ms. Johnson cannot discuss the school’s culture without including the students and staff in the description.

At Glenn Dale Middle School, the principal, Fran Jackson, recognizes the expectations of the community when describing the culture. Her vision for the “perfect school” extends many years down the road. “I think of it as an environment when you walk in the school, what the atmosphere is like, what you feel, what the students think of the school, what the community thinks of the school, our interaction with the community and in opening a new school, you have the opportunity to shape that cultural environment so I just thought about if I could, at the end of my career, say ‘this is a perfect model school, what would make it the perfect school’ and those are the things that we wanted to happen at our school.”

Teamwork

The school staff and community also play a vital role in the development of a school’s culture. In addition to hiring staff for a school that is just opening, making sure that new staff members will accept and support the existing culture, expectations, and direction the school has embraced is crucial. The principal of East View Elementary School recognizes that a school’s family is all encompassing: “When I talk about the school family, I certainly am talking about all of the school employees all the way from the newest custodian that we have on staff to a teacher like Mary Jones. She has been teaching for 40 some years,
has held every job in the system, knows all the ropes as well as parents in the community, the faith leaders. They are all involved in what’s going on at (our school), either directly or indirectly, and so they are a part of the greater school family and lots of things that we do at our school impact them, whether they are actually on our campus every day or not.”

At Pine Bluff Elementary School, the school’s “family” takes center court, as the principal tries to establish customs and traditions at his school. One effective strategy implemented at Pine Bluff Elementary School by Principal Martin was a staff banquet held during Teacher Appreciation week. The banquet included a staff dinner, a short program, and a dance for the staff. However, the school family goes a little further than that, according to Mr. Martin – the entire school family also includes the students, parents, and community. Principal Martin explains that a school family is very much like a traditional family. “You know thinking of your school as a family makes you think about what a true family means in order to be a successful family and to have respect for each other, have to love each other. It obviously is a different kind of love than what we have for our immediate family members, but you have to have the motivation to want to be together and to work together.”

Much like a traditional family, a school family functions successfully because the members of the family recognize and respect the different roles each member of the family plays: “Trust is a very, very important aspect when I think of school family. We have to be able to trust each other, to value each others’ thoughts professionally. We often tend to evaluate each other just by the role they play here at school. That is something we touched on just the other night and we all have different roles that we play. The custodians, obviously, is much more different than what the classroom teacher does or a child nutrition
employee is much more different that what an assistant principal does but we have to value everyone’s position here and the role that they play because without one person….without that role being here at the school, we would not be where we are today. It takes everyone in taking pride in what they do and in taking ownership in what they do to try to find the best way to achieve the school goals and personal goals in order for us to continue to be even beyond what our expectations are.”

Opening a new school brought along a special set of concerns at Pine Bluff Elementary School – helping staff members embrace their new school family. The principal shares his efforts to make a clean break from the shadow of a neighboring school where most of the staff and many of the students transferred from. He explains, “The school family is something that takes time to build, especially in looking at a new school that was something that was probably a little concern for me in bringing many people together that had never worked together the first time. Obviously you do that each school year anytime you have vacancies to fill ….. (it’s easier if) you already have an established school and established team. But with a new school you are putting together an entirely new team. You may have some people that came from one school and so they would continue to work together but you are really bringing together many different people, many various backgrounds, and each may have different thoughts and ways of how it should be. For example: ‘at my school we did it this way’ or ‘here’s how it was done’. That was something in the beginning when we were forming the school; I made it very clear that our goal was not to be another school. For example, a large percentage of our staff was from (a neighboring school) and I told the staff here that my goal was not to become a mirror of that school. That we were Pine Bluff
Elementary School and that we would have our own vision, and we would set our own goals and mission. Not that (the other school) was not a great school but ……that everyone should come together to define our school culture, our goals and vision as to where we should be so that we would be our own school.”

Susan Johnson, principal of Shady Creek Middle School, also draws a correlation between the tradition family and that of the school family. “We are a family, more like brothers and sisters. You can get irritated at each other but you still love each other and care about each other and care about the best welfare of everyone and you know the culture of your school and that you are a family and if there is a conflict or if someone is in trouble or someone is experiencing problems.” As the school’s highest ranking administrator, Ms. Johnson likens her role to that of a parent. Like a parent, when there is conflict or an issue at the school, she helps the make sure the staff will “all rise together to try to help fix and make that situation better for both parties. It is a family in the terms that we are all here together for one common purpose which is to educate children and at the same time, the purpose is to support each other as best as we can.”

The role of the school family at Shady Creek Middle School is “helping that person and help make sure that the school adheres to (our goals and mission) which is to provide a quality education for every student, regardless of their backgrounds.” The school family is “not just the teachers, but the teacher assistants, the custodian staff, the office staff…we all work together as a unit. Not perfect, but we all work together as we have that unified purpose.”
At Glenn Dale Middle School, school family includes even those members of the community that may not have students at the school. The principal explains, “When I think of school family, I think of first and foremost of the students. I think of the staff, the entire staff, not just the teachers but the custodians, the teacher assistants, the cafeteria staff…..we are all a part of the team. I think of the parents, I think of the community. We are very fortunate here to have a community who really wanted this school and supported our school even though they do not have children here…many of them…in fact. We had far more community members at our dedication ceremony than we did students. So we have a very wide community support base here that are proud of our school and support us in every way. I include all of those people in our school family.” Like many traditional families, a school family can include an ever-changing, diverse group of students, parents, teachers, support staff, and interested community members who only want the school to be successful.

**Bringing Stakeholders Together**

The day-to-day operations of a well-organized, established school can be trying for the most experienced and seasoned administrators. Opening a new school, with a plethora of obstacles – creating a common vision for students and staff members from several merging schools, missing furniture and supplies, new bus routes, nervous and anxious staff, students, and principals – is a feat in and of itself. As the participants share, these challenges took their toll during their opening year. The biggest challenge at East View Elementary was easing concerns from teachers who were transferred to the new school by a district mandate. The principal recalls: “The biggest challenge that I had was bringing teachers together from several different schools and melting them into a new community where they said ‘Yes, I am
a teacher at (East View Elementary School) and this is the way we do things here verses ‘Well, I taught at ………for three years and that is not the way we did it there and I liked the way we did it there’.”

There was some resistance during the first year as “some of them were resistant and unhappy because they had just started to get accustomed to (their old school) and then they were told in May or late April that they were going to have to go to a new school.” Many of the new staff came from one school and “were the ‘last hired’ at (the old school). There was one or two veterans that opted to come to (East View) but most of the ones that came were the last hired. They had been there one or two years.” Principal Jones understood their concern, but recognized that the staff would have to embrace their new school in order to move forward.

Pine Bluff Elementary School had similar concerns with bringing well over 100 new staff members together in a new school: Principal Martin remembers that he and the administration were “crossing our fingers and hoping that everyone would work well together and build that trust that needs to be there; that respect for one another and valuing others’ positions. Getting the right people in the right position does work to be a challenge. That is something I took very seriously.” Additionally, Mr. Martin focused on what he determined to be key leadership positions in the school when the hiring process started. “I started with what I perceive as being the most important leadership within the school, the assistant principal was very, very important to me to spend time interviewing for the right person because I knew that person was going to be a major player in the school. The treasurer/lead secretary was the first person I hired - a very, very important role. Then I had
to hire a head custodian.” The principal then shifted his focus to the grade level teams. Recognizing he needed key teacher leaders in place he wanted to “hire someone in those positions that you knew would be a leader and help you in hiring the other positions within that grade level.”

Another challenge was ensuring a smooth transition for the students. One benefit Pine Bluff Elementary School had was that all of the students transferred from one school. Given this benefit, the principal was “able to spend a lot of time in that school, learning some of the systems that were in place at that school and learning some of the students and learning what they thought were useful things going on at their school, things that they thought they would love to see improve. We wanted to have some things very similar for the students to make the transition but at the same time it kind of goes back to what I said, I did not want to create a school that was a clone of another school so we had to look at a very fine balance there. What were some other systems that we needed to have in place and hoped that our students would feel comfortable in coming to a new school but at the same time have some things in place that are going to make us stand out as our own school.”

Helping parents adjust to a new school with a new culture was another obstacle faced by Principal Martin. “One of my fears was that I would have parents on a daily basis coming to me saying ‘well last year at their old school they had this so why are you not doing this here because they loved it so much and why is this happening and why is that happening’. It is the comparison concern. Although there was some of that, there definitely was not as much as I had been concerned there would be. Again, the advantage for me was all of our school came from one school so I was able to spend a lot of time from the beginning in
attending PTA meetings, award ceremonies. There was the advisory council meetings, many events that were occurring in the community that would be brought into the school, I tried to be there because it is important for me to get my face out there to them to let them know who I was, to try to answer questions that they may have, to go ahead and try to establish the level of trust that needs to be there as a leader of their school. The parents need to have that trust that the principal of the school will be the person who is going to take care of their kids and make sure that school was heading in the right direction. So it was important to me from the beginning that parents knew who I was early on.”

Finances were also an early concern for opening a new school. Although every school faces budget concerns, at a new school “there is so much that you have to have in your first year. With other schools that I have been in each year you look at your budget and kind of add to what is already there. You look at your priorities and you focus on what your needs are for that given year, but in opening of a new school there are so many things that you need and you need to have them that year. You cannot wait until the second year to have those things. That was a challenge. For example, something small like calculators….we spent $9000 on calculators because that was something we had to have that first year. Again it goes back to the students were used to having calculators. So in opening a new school and not be able to put a calculator in each student’s hand as they had been used to that would be, first of all a disservice to their education as they were used to having it and there is a purpose for using the calculators. But another thing would be a concern from parents saying that what you are offering at the new school is not comparable to what they had at the other school. So although we were given some opening startup funds, I did not have to go back to
the superintendent and request more funds just because of the cost of the things that were needed as far as instructional supplies, so forth. I will say upfront that I do not think you can ever have enough money to open up a new school because I would say even if I had been given more money I would have used it. I feel the principal of a new school must be willing to go back to the superintendent and say “I need more money” because if you do not have the things that are needed at your school, again they will look at leadership and they will look at that principal and think that the principal did not plan as he or she should have in order to open up a new school.”

As far as the facility itself, accommodating the sheer number of students was a challenge. Pine Bluff Elementary School opened “with over 800 students and that was a challenge in the fact because typically the school within our county had started with a lesser enrollment. I would say approximately 500 or less and so, starting a new school with over 800 students was a challenge because it really did not give us a lot of time to put our systems in place, to monitor those systems very closely and to improve upon them. This all really happened fast and had a sense of urgency in that we had so many more students. We did not have a lot of room, if that makes sense, to give ourselves time to get up and running so we had to just open on the first day of school running basically. The other part of facilities as far as being a challenge for the students is that we had some small rooms that were built in our wings for uses such as Resource, Speech, those types of things and even before we opened based upon the student numbers that we had here, I had to go back to the Associate Superintendent and tell them that we needed those small classrooms enlarged to a regular classroom. So before the school was even built, they had to modify four small rooms and
change them into two large classrooms and so a couple of days before school opened is when they finally finished those classrooms.”

Uncertain enrollment numbers also played a part in the opening: “a challenge in opening a new school as far as just your enrollment…how many actual students will you have. We had estimates and we were pretty good with our estimates but you never quite know until that first day how many students you are going to have and so making sure your facility would hold all the students and that you had the appropriate number of classrooms prepared for them was a challenge….sort of a guessing game. As far as like student desks and chairs and teacher desks, chairs….that was based on the layout of the school and how many classroom were already in the plans as far as to what was on the blueprint…but we did have to make some changes. For example, we have a wing that was supposed to be all kindergarten and all first grades. When we were entering the first day of school we knew we could not get all of our kindergarten and first grade class all on that one wing, so we had to switch some of our classes. We had to move some of our first grade classes over to another wing because we could not fit them all on the wing in which they were designed to be fit on. Opening up a new school that was so large, I think that just added to the challenge of opening a new school.”

Other concerns involved the construction schedule and deadlines for completing the building. “It was a rush for us to begin. At one point the school was very much on schedule and then the crew that was at this school moved to another school as there were two elementary schools in the county that opened up at the same time, and they moved to the other school because it was behind schedule and they caught them up but then it got our
school behind schedule. When I had first talked with the Associate Superintendent about opening up this school, in my mind I had that we would be here midsummer, which was going to be very nice and get into the building and start walking around the building and seeing first hand what needs to be done, but our timeline was pushed back pretty drastically so we moved in I would say probably about four or five days before the teachers’ first day. When I say we I mean administration, office staff, custodians….I mean there was a lot to be done before the teachers came but it happened, we made it happen.”

The principal of Shady Creek Middle School was able to pinpoint two primary concerns, hiring quality staff and addressing concerns from teachers that were forced to transfer to the new school. Ms. Johnson reflects that “my biggest challenges at the time were to staff the school, make sure that I had quality teachers to take the positions that were open. Another one was to really work on the culture of the school because when you split a school and the way the school split there were certain teachers that moved here but they did not want to come.” In an effort to help ease some of the anxiety from teachers forced to transfer, she “promised them that if (the other principal) would take them back that I would let them go back, and I did, but that created a problem for me over the summer because I was hiring up to the time school started. So the biggest thing for me at the time was to hire the staff and try to create a climate and culture….to try to start off the way I wanted to end up. To try to work with the end in mind…what did I want at the end of the year and this journey to look like and at the same time trying to get people coming from all different places in trying to build that family structure and support.”
Just the opposite of Pine Bluff Elementary School, Glenn Dale Middle School faced the huge challenge of merging several schools into one school the year they opened. “In all, we had nine schools. And what was hard about that is that there is no where in the summer to secure cumulative records before the school could open. Had we been splitting with an existing school, I could have gone to that one school and done a lot of work but it was very difficult to turn around to do things at all schools. One of the things for me that was difficult in opening this year was that we had students coming from nine different schools and by being in a temporary office, there was no where to centrally store and secure cumulative records, so if you are opening a school that has half of another school you can go to that school and look at everything but I couldn’t and there was lots of information that I needed about students that I did not have and could not get and was very surprised to learn there was no centralized list of AIG students. There is not a list for middle school…..the center there would be, but for middle school there is not a centralized list that identifies the student as being gifted. There is not a centralized list of who is qualified for Algebra and Pre-Algebra and so I had to rely on getting that from the different feeder schools and it was difficult. We had to wait and do a lot of things that I would have like to have done sooner. We had to wait until they got us into the building because of the sensitivity of the records. We got into the building two weeks before the teachers came back. So I only had two weeks to get schedules and that was very hard. That was a big challenge….learning information about the students before they got here.”

Additionally, Glenn Dale Middle School faced several issues with their facility. As the principal explained, “we had a lot of technology issues in the school and did not get
technology online in time to have the effective type of school open that we wanted. We had a lot of teachers who still have technology issues, you know, a month within the school year. Getting into the school itself: you really can not get in the school to get things secure and you can not secure it until they get a certain amount finished, so we moved in about August 3rd and school opened in two or three weeks and that was a big challenge.”

Merging the staffs from existing schools, as well as new teachers and teachers new to the district “was also very challenging. Trying to create the school culture with a whole new staff was very difficult. We had a whole new staff. A lot of new teachers: we had some teachers who had been in Smith County schools but we had to bond and team and come together and these people, very few people knew other people. That was really challenging. We really have worked on teaming and bonding, so all of those things are challenging.” Additionally, wanting to ensure a smooth transition from a previous school to the new school for students was a priority. “Knowing that you had 8th grade parents that you knew their children did not want to leave (their old school), they were very happy with the school where they were and did not want to leave. While we do not take that personally, it still, you know you have to meet the needs of those parents and those students.”

**Support for Administrators**

Serving as the principal in any school can be a lonely and isolated job. As the participants opened new schools, and continue serving as principals, they have developed a support network comprised of other administrators at the school and district level. The principal of East View Elementary School still maintains a close relationship with a former principal and central services administrator he worked with before assuming his own
“If I have a problem, I call (him) and I say ‘this is what happened, this is what I am thinking about doing, what do you think?’ Also, I worked with (the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction) here in the county in various capacities ever since the early 80’s and I feel real confident about bouncing anything off of (him) in the curricular area. I mean he is just an expert and can give you good, sound advise and he always has his head on his shoulders and his feet firmly on the ground and lots of good, common sense and good experience. (The Deputy Superintendent) is someone who has come on in more recent years who gives great advice and great council. Can look at things just passionately and help you see…..you know sometimes you may be a little bit cloudy by anger or being in the middle of the situation…he can step back and say ‘you know, what is really the issue here and what do we really want to accomplish’….he kind of helps focus the picture for you.”

Principal Jones shares that the isolation of a new principal in a temporary office adds to the sense of being alone during the planning stages: “One of the frustrations that I had during that time when I was in a temporary office was I felt real isolated from the people at the central office and sometimes I was calling to question something and I was asked why had I not already done that. Well nobody told me I was supposed to have done that by April 1st and so that is why I haven’t done it. Do you know if there is a timeline for something to be done, you need the timeline and I always adhere to the timeline. But I have to have a timeline in order to know that things have to be done, instead I was playing catch up.”

Tom Martin, principal of Pine Bluff Elementary School, looks to “the mentor principals that have been there before me. I have them in my Nextel. I talk with many of
them on a daily basis and throw ideas off on them, throw challenges, throw situational type of experiences off on them...just to get their thoughts. That has been very, very important to me to have those contacts out there from people who may have already gone through what you are going through and may have experienced some things that you are experiencing and hearing how they faced that challenge and what they did to work through that challenge to give you ideas to be able to help you as well.”

Principal Martin also recognizes the feelings of isolation that come with serving as a school’s principal. He explains, “I have always said this that administration, I even felt it as an AP, but administration can be a lonely profession because when you are a teacher you have your team there that you can talk to each and every day. If there is sorrow, you go to your team, they are there for you, you can trust, you can vent to someone because you have your team, but when you become an administrator, even though you are still part of the team, it is a little bit different. As principal I can’t go vent down to a first grade teacher or to another teacher. And there are some things that I do with personnel, parents, that I just can’t go seek the advise of another teacher on the staff. So you have to have those professional contacts that you can speak to. You know they are going to give sound advice, you know they are going to be very confidential in what they tell you. I think everybody needs that.”

At Shady Creek Middle School, the principal also looks to her primary peer group (other middle school principals) for guidance, advice and support: “If I did not have the other middle school principals to talk to, there are some in particular that I talk to, if I did not have them it would be very, very lonely. Very lonely. Those are the folks that I rely on. Because the family members don’t really understand and friends don’t really understand when you
have a kid climbing off the walls like you can’t get rid of them, you can’t do that….or if you have a staff member that is not working to the best of their ability, you can’t just snap and get rid of them. There are a lot of people who are not in the school system that does not understand the kind of process and procedures and paperwork that we have to go through. We share things with each other, we share ideas and we share an ear. Those are the folks that I go to.”

Principal Jackson at Glenn Dale Middle School extends her network to include staff members at every level of the district’s organization. Additionally, she relies on her faith as she attempts to make the best possible decisions for her school. She explains, “I have talked to everybody. I pray a lot. My faith walk is the number one thing for me. I am a very teaming, orientated person. I involve my assistant principal in everything that I possibly can. We do everything, we talk about everything as a team. It has made some of the teachers uncomfortable. Some of the teachers have said, ‘just tell us what you want us to do’. But I am really big on teaming, I am really big on the person at the level to make the decision but I do if I have questions, I do not hesitate to call other people, other principals, central services support staff, experts in certain areas. I don’t hesitate to get info from others at all. The whole family support, when I say family is the county family support. I use the whole support structure. I try not to worry people but I don’t hesitate to ask a question if I have one. I have never been bashful about asking questions. I had rather ask and get the information that I need if I am not sure.”
A Common Set of Goals

The time spent planning and organizing for the opening of a new school is very crucial to the long term success of the school. As the participants reflected on the processes and procedures they experienced, there were several similar activities that proved to be effective. At East View Elementary School “the big thing that we did to introduce ourselves and our school to the community was to have what we call a ‘Summer Night at (East View)’ and I think there was three different nights that we invited parents in for a couple of hours. We had a K-1 on one night, a 2 - 3 night, and a 4 - 5 night where the teachers for those grade levels were there. We met in the cafetorium. We talked a little about what our school was going to be like and then we divided the parents or community members that were there into groups to tour the building and those tours were actually led by the teachers and teacher assistants from those grade levels.”

As mentioned previously, Pine Bluff Elementary School was very fortunate that all of their students were being transferred from one school. This allowed the principal “to spend a lot of time in that school, learning some of the systems that were in place at that school and learning some of the students and learning what they thought were useful things going on at their school, things that they thought they would love to see improve. And that helped me in opening the school.” Additionally, he was able to “spend a lot of time from the beginning in getting (parents) to attending PTA meetings, award ceremonies. But the parents…there was the advisory council meetings, any events that were occurring in the community that would be brought into the school, I tried to be there because it as important for me to get my face out there to them to let them know who I was, to try to answer questions that they may have,
to go ahead and try to establish the level of trust that needs to be there as a leader of their school.”

At Shady Creek Middle School, the majority of students also came from one middle school. This was also helpful for the principal, as she recalls: “One really great thing was that the PTA at the elementary school approached me and I am glad they did. I met with them. Actually, I got a chance to go to the last PTA meeting and then I met with the PTA officers over the summer before school started and they had an opportunity to talk to me, share their concerns, we planned activities throughout the year. That was really positive. The other thing was when I met with the teachers during before school got out, I had a sheet that I had them to fill out and I had them to tell me what grade they would ideally like to teach and what subject, what their certification was, if they were any clubs or activities they were involved in that they would like to be involved in here, anything that they wanted to tell me about to include in the school, they had some input there and the things that I could honor, I did as best I could.”

Principal Johnson was able to involve the students in the transition. “I also had the students select the mascot when the school year got out. We did a contest with them and that helped to kind of build up their excitement of coming to a middle school. Then I also attended the fifth grade promotional exercise. I did a lot. I tried to make as much contact with parents and the community as I could. I had a lot reaching out to me too. So it worked both ways.” Those staff members who were excited about the move to the new middle school were also involved. “Some of the teachers who knew they were coming, they were excited. The ones who really wanted to be here, they were really excited about school and
they would offer suggestions and come out in the summer and help once we actually got into the building.”

The principal at Glenn Dale Middle School recognized that changing times required a change in the initial priorities for preparing for the opening of school. “One of the things that we tried to do very early on was in getting our website up and running, I had to be our webmaster because it was merely me the summer before. But while I was in the temporary office, I tried to have a very active website to give information and I made sure that my number was published and that people could call me. I responded to parents by e-mail or with phone calls. Those were the first responses. I talked with parents every day about something.” Like the other principals, interacting with the students who were going to be transferred to the new school was also very important. “The next thing we did was I had a meeting at one school for the current 7th and 8th grade students coming over here….just a question and answer meeting with the parents. I did the same type of meeting at another school for rising 6th graders who were new to middle school in general because it was two different sets of questions. Those rising sixth graders had middle school questions and the group out at the other school had questions about the new school. They knew about middle school but they wanted to know about (Glenn Dale Middle School). It was two different types of meetings.”

Thinking about the long term success of the school, and as a means to begin to establish a unique culture at Glenn Dale Middle School, the principal then turned to the community in general for support. “The third thing we tried to do to build that culture, we had in the summer before we ever moved into the building, we advertised for community
groups or anybody who wanted to come in and be involved in setting up and establishing parent groups, parent support groups at the school and we had a meeting that night and we talked about what type of school we want. I lead a discussion on how PTA, Athletic Booster, Academic Booster…..all types of parent groups….how all of us even though we support the school in different ways, we all have the same goal and that is to support our students. So we talked about Advisory Council that night, and we got a PTA established, we got an Athletic Booster Club established, we had the beginnings of an Advisory Council established before we ever even got in the building and that was very important. We opened this school with a group of parents already involved and that was important. When we had our orientation, we had as many community people as we did students. We opened the school to everybody at orientation, not just parents and we did a long orientation, it was floating, starting at 2:00 in afternoon until that night. Everybody wanted to see the school, so we did that to try to involve everybody as much as possible. The ladies auxiliary of a local church volunteered to come serve breakfast on the first day for the teachers and they brought their own homemade jams, jellies and biscuits; so that was a way our teachers could meet the community. Everybody has been very, very supportive.”

**Time Constraints**

Finding a balance between the stressful and time-consuming job of opening a new school and one’s personal life can be very difficult. East View Elementary School Principal Ted Jones describes his challenges of finding this balance during the year he opened his school: “The first year I essentially felt that I lived at (East View) and that I slept at home. When I came home, which was often late at night, I was so exhausted that after a brief
conversation with my wife I just went to bed and woke up the next morning and started doing it again. There just wasn’t enough time in the day to get everything done that needed to be done to know everything that was going on and make sure it was being done right in a way that we could all be proud of because we were bringing together so many different teachers from so many different places and we wanted to make sure they were all on aboard in doing things pretty much the same way.”

The non-stop requirements had an impact on Mr. Jones’ role as “parent” as well. “I remember that my daughter was in the first grade that year and she had a veteran teacher that I had known for years and the most crucial grade for a child and I never gave 30 minutes thought to my daughter’s education because I knew her first grade teacher was handling that and when I went to Open House and parent conferences and stuff like that. That was my time to rest and relax at my job and I often found myself dozing off during those conferences for her because my wife was attending it on top of it and I knew that things were going to get there so that was kind of my downtime when I was at my daughter’s school. During the first year I did not have a personal life. Way in advance I scheduled a trip because I knew I would need the time and I did need the time, but I was so tired by the time we got down to the beach at midnight Friday night that I just sat around in a stupor all weekend not wanting to do anything and I kept worrying about what was left undone at school and it was just a miserable weekend. The whole year was like a blur. I never thought about anything all year long except school. Weekends, weeknights, holidays.”

Principal Jones relays a particular emotional experience and a tough decision he has had to make. “I had a unique situation the third year I was at (East View) because I lost my
wife to cancer and had an eight year old child so I had to make the decision then whether I as
going to be career man or be a father and have the best school to be the best principal or be
the best daddy, and I just decided that I was going to be the best daddy that I could be and if
what I had left over to give the school wasn’t enough then the superintendent could put me
back in the assistant principal role. He could put me back in the exceptional teacher role and
so I found a better balance. But I see how my school has suffered because of that because I
do not give it what I did the first two years that I was there. I have my 30 years in now and I
am going to do the best that I can for the rest of the time that I work. My daughter is entering
high school and I am going to be at her events. One year, I think the fourth year I was there I
was in an awards ceremony at my school and we were in between ceremonies and a parent
said, ‘what grade is your daughter in now’ and I said ‘well she is in fourth grade and she is
having her award ceremony starting right now.’ They said, “Why are you here?” I said
“because I have an award ceremony right here.” They said “don’t ever miss your daughter’s
award ceremony for our children. Your assistant principal can do it.” So from then on I
never missed one and I never will and if that is something an issue that a parent needs to take,
they can take it. My assistant principal announces to them why I am not there and when I get
back, whatever grade level I missed, I go to their classroom. Typically all the parents were
very supportive and very understanding so I found a better balance but it was because I was
forced to. I would have never have found it if I had not had that personal issue come up. So
I have found a better balance. I have stressed and I am tired all the time but when I want to
take time, I make time to take my time.”
Tom Martin has also felt the pressure of trying to find balance between his role as principal of Pine Bluff Elementary and that of husband and father. He explains, “As you can visually see I have much less hair. It was very demanding of my time but it was an exciting adventure. Personally for me I had many things going on and when I tell people of everything that my family and myself was doing at the time, they look at me like I was crazy. When I opened up Pine Bluff we were in the process of building a new house, which is a huge task in and of itself. I was having my third child and my wife started graduate school and then we were opening up this new school…..so, four major things going on at one time and any one of those if you would just do it by itself would take up a lot of your time. So it was very, very busy; very, very busy for awhile with opening up this new school. Looking back at it I don’t know how I did it all to be honest with you. I probably could say I have a very understanding wife but that balance of your time is very important. I do spend much less time at school now than I used to. I used to live school, live and breath it. I realize if I kept doing that I would have school but then I would not have anything else. School was very, very important to me and it became a priority but there are other things that are priorities too….mainly the church and other things too, so I have to balance my time as well as I can. But opening up a new school does require much more time than specifically going through the summer of an existing school. There are many, many other things you have to plan for verses just planning to start up a new school year in a school that already exists. I am not sure if that answers your question very well but it was very busy, but like I said, I think what made it nice was that everything was exciting because you knew that what you were doing was so important in working in a new building, working with new people that
you never worked with before, working with parents that you never worked with before, knowing that you are going to be starting up this culture in this school, that you had a hand in it….that was very exciting to be a part of it.”

At Glenn Dale Middle School, Ms. Jackson faced some very challenging times as she prepared to open the school. “It is a 24 hour mental job. I knew it was a lot of responsibility but I did not even understand how much of a mental obligation it is because it is just like….when I am sitting there staring in his face….my husband knows I am thinking about something else. It is a lot of physical hours as well. I never get caught up but I had to learn to balance family and home. This is a job that can consume you if you let it. My husband got sick. I told you about my faith. One of my favorite scriptures in the Bible is ‘all things work together for good’ and I couldn’t understand how my husband could be sick with the health problems that he has had but I have come home a lot of days when I probably would have worked late and the building still stood and they make it without you and you learn how to balance because that is very important. This job can just be all consuming and my family is very important to me. I am thankful that I have had the opportunity to learn that and to enjoy it. Not learn it and be sorry because my husband is doing o.k. We are just keeping his health watched and I am glad I had that. During the month of August I worked 17 hour days, six days a week. The month that school started, I did. But once we got in this school building, it was 17 hour days, six days a week. Once school starts, you do not have any down time.”
The Significance of Hiring New Staff

Hiring new staff members, whether at a new or existing school, is a crucial aspect of any administrator’s job. All four participants reflect that hiring new staff members is one of the most important activities they engaged in when opening their schools. Ted Jones relied on advice from a former principal he worked for before opening East View Elementary School: “One of the things I try to do is make sure that I have time to let a candidate talk so that it is not a rushed interview. (A former principal) or someone else that told me that if you will let people talk long enough they will tell you what you want to know so I try not to cut people off when they begin to expound on an answer because sometimes without even meaning to they will tell you maybe what the answer to an unasked question is that reveals something about themselves on how they feel about people, how they feel about authority, how they feel about co-workers, how they feel about an inclusive culture.”

Mr. Jones focuses on two specific questions during an interview with a potential employee. As he explains, “Two of the questions that I always hit at the end are ‘the role of flexibility in a teacher’s success’ and ‘the role of a positive attitude’. If they give me a short answer on those then I try to flush it out with more questions because in my experience, the unhappiest teachers are the ones that are inflexible and they have a schedule and if they have to vary from that schedule it ruins their day and they make the day difficult for those around him/her. I am not looking for somebody who knows all the answers because that is one thing I have learned in thirty years is that the longer I stay in it the more I know that I do not have all of the answers but somebody that is willing to learn from other people that has a positive attitude, an open attitude, somebody that is going to be a continuous learner because so many
of the things that we took workshops on and learned so hard how to do and changed now, we have had to relearn how to do it and so to me it is about being willing to learn and grow. If you think when you finish your degree that you have learned everything you know to teach for 30 years, then you have already lost the battle.”

Tom Martin, principal of Pine Bluff Elementary, looks for new staff members who embrace a commitment of continuous improvement that he and the current staff have dedicated themselves to. Mr. Martin describes his expectations. “Obviously we can continue to improve in so all areas. We have a high level of parental involvement here and that is a wonderful thing, but something that we talk a lot here within our staff is not to become complacent. Just because we have wonderful parents, a wonderful community and they volunteer their time up here on a daily basis and have great fundraisers, have raised a lot of money for our school and just because we have kids that, for the most part, come from homes where parents are able to provide them with the opportunities that some students are not fortunate enough to have, just for the fact that we have students who seem to score well on the End of Grade tests, we can’t be complacent with that. We can’t just say ‘we are doing a great job and we can just maintain what we are doing’, we still need to move forward and continually improve and find new ways, better ways, not just add more to what we are doing but sometime even look at eliminating some things that we are doing because we feel like the impact is not there as it should be but continuous learning on our part to strive to become better in all of our areas, striving to become better in parent involvement, strive to have our staff continuously learning whether it is attending Professional Development sessions, whether it is going back to get a master’s degree, whether it is National Board Certification,
having our staff move forward, staff retention is something that we hope we can maintain. Thus far here at Pine Bluff we have had a very, very low turnover rate and that is something that we want to maintain. We feel as though we have invested a lot of time and support in our staff each year in various Professional Development opportunities and being able to add over time to the level of success that we have.”

At Shady Creek Middle School, Principal Susan Johnson looks for candidates that demonstrate one specific trait – “Attitude. I have had people come in and say ‘well, I have no experience or it will be my first year’ well, I can deal with that because as long as they learn and they have the right attitude and also I look for people that are impressive in that if they need help, they will ask for it because there are times when…..if you are the kind of person that can suffer in silence, I don’t necessarily know if this is going to be a good environment because we are not always going to be there to always figure out what you need and so that is why I love that team concept because it forces teachers to be a part of what we are doing. You don’t want someone to suffer and to be under stress and be on an island by themselves. That is not conducive for them or the children. Again, that is why I like the team concept and that culture where I want them to question and challenge if there is an issue because they teach the children, I tell them all the time, I do not teach these children…you teach the children. And my perspective at times is different from theirs. When I first took the job, I said all I want to remember is what it is like to be a teacher and I still do but there is still much to do but the environment that culture such as, they know they can come to me and we can work it out. I tried to make sure that that part of the culture is there, that they know if there is something that I may have not thought of or they have something that I can enhance
that they do, they know that they have that available to them. And for the ones that don’t take advantage of it, that is a loss for them but it is there. They know that it is there.”

Glenn Dale Middle School Principal Fran Jackson also has a specific attribute that she looks for when hiring new staff. “I look primarily for one thing. I look for teachers that I believe can engage students in learning. I have some of the most structured teachers. I have some of the right brain off the wall. I have all cultures here, ethnicities, personalities, but all of them can engage students to learn. They do it in different ways and that is the thing I look for and I do believe we have a really good staff at our school. We do have a lot of ILT’s….83% of the staff here are ILT’s. They are needy, they have not learned how to manage their time yet best. They are not poor (in regards to instructional practices) but they are not like they will be in five years. They have not learned how to be proactive with behavioral situations so you have a lot more behavior issues with the significantly new staff. But they engage students in learning and they prepare high quality engaging activities and that is the thing I look for.”

**Principal’s Advice for Opening a New School**

Keeping in mind the growth of Smith County Schools, all four participants have made efforts to assist other principals charged with the task of opening new schools in the district. One principal has been asked to share his experiences of opening a new school to various groups, including the district’s assistant principals. Another participant is assembling a working manuscript for the superintendent on the steps she has taken in opening a new middle school. Ted Jones, the most experienced principal of the group, has this to offer to new administrators: “I would say lean heavily on the advice of veteran administrators who
you know who have done things the right way and have been successful. Work hard to make sure you have some veteran teachers on your staff that can be teacher leaders and cheerleaders for the young teachers and give them guidance and give them support because you are going to have so much going on the first year that the amount of time that will give those teachers yourself are going to be greatly limited by the fact that you are at a brand new school.”

Tom Martin, principal of Pine Bluff Elementary, has similar advice. He suggests a principal at a new school “seek advice from others. I can remember when I first became a principal I was a little hesitant to seek advice from other principals because I didn’t want people out there to think I did not have the skills and knowledge to be a principal and part of me thought that if as a principal I ask too many questions, then I should already know that. But I have learned that every situation is different and what worked two years ago in that situation may not work today in that same situation. So I don’t feel bad anymore about calling up another principal and they do it to me and say ‘let me ask your thoughts on this, this is what is going on’. But definitely opening up another new school, I hope it helps to go speak to other principals who have opened up a new school to just sit down with them, even if it is a very quick discussion….say ‘what do you think are the top three things I should be focused on in opening up this school.’”

Additionally, Principal Martin refers back to the school’s initial budget: “Budget is very, very important. Every year the budget is very important especially in opening up a new school, that budget is important and talk to other principals, tell me what you purchased that first year, tell me what your priority that you had to have at your school in opening up that
new school.” Finally, Principal Martin makes a simple suggestion that is often taken for granted. “I would say one of the most important things I would say to a principal is get out in that community, make yourself visible, establish the contacts, talk to the staff, talk to the kids, talk to the parents.”

Susan Johnson recommends that principals at new schools “delegate more. It is hard to do that because you do not know your folks and everything is not established, but if you know what you are looking for and you know what the end result is going to be, you can communicate more what you want, put more thought into what you need, what you want.” She would also suggest that a principal at a new school “really think about how they want to organize themselves. Paperwork can pile up and if you take the time to plan on the front end, it saves you a lot of time on the back end later.”

Ms. Jackson, principal of Glen Dale Middle School, recommends that when opening a new school, the long-term benefits of waiting for the right person for the job outweighs the short-term benefits of filling a position. She explains: “I was willing to suffer in the short-term for long-term benefits. By that I mean I didn’t hire my secretary until July 1st because she was employed at another school and I could not hire her until she closed out her year, but she was worth the wait. She is a high quality person and she was worth the wait. I only had one assistant principal this year but that was worth the wait too rather than have someone who didn’t fit. I only had one AP and that was very hard but in the long-term it was better because I have a very high quality person. It was hard on us but in the long term it was better.”
Ms. Jackson also recommends tackling as much of the paperwork and procedural tasks as you can before school starts: “Unless you know your staff, and you are going to have a significant number of experienced people, you need to get everything done that can possibly be done. Even if you call a school and say ‘e-mail me what you have got’ and get it all done in the summer because once school starts, you are going to have a significant percentage of ILT’s that will control your year. They have not yet learned how to be proactive with classroom management because it has created more behavioral problems and more office referrals so you are in the office dealing with that which prevents you from being in the hallways or the classrooms as much as you would like to be.” Having as much of the paperwork and procedural tasks completed as possible will help “because you just don’t know what you are going to deal with” once school starts.

**Principal’s Thoughts of Opening a New School Again**

As the old adage goes, “Hindsight is 20/20.” For the four principals, after having time to reflect on their own experiences in opening a new school, they have determined several things they would have done differently. Ted Jones is very concise with what he would do differently. “I think I would try to get the leadership team and the advisory council, both, organized and functioning more quickly so that there was a greater feeling of ownership by the community as well as by the staff.” Principal Jones would have also spent more time with the principal of a newly opened elementary school in the district. He reflects “The most helpful thing that I did was meet with the principal at …… Elementary. That school was done two years before mine and it was built on the same plan as mine and I spent some time with them. I actually was there during their dismissal time and I observed the
dismissal process. However, in hindsight I wished I had gone out periodically and met with him and taken notes of what I had done, what challenges I was having, where I felt like I met road blocks, what could I do differently, what could I do better in the time that I had left before the school opened because I met with him for a concentrated length of time that one day and I called him a couple of times and spoke to him real quickly on the phone but in hindsight, you could benefit, because I had only a certain amount of knowledge to ask questions when I went to see him but as time progressed I would have had more questions, so if I had it to do over again that is what I would recommend that someone spend more time with the persons of interest.”

Tom Martin would spend more time in the community, establishing and building a positive relationship with the community. Even though he did spend a significant amount of time engaged in this activity, additional time in the community would have been well spent. “I was able to answer questions as they came, and spend time with people and help them feel very comfortable with new schools and know that their child was going to be going to a good place. The questions that I got most were about the safety of our kids. You have parents where their kids are attending a school and for the most part, they are very, very comfortable with that school and they have known that school for years and the thought of now leaving that school where they already have a culture, they already have all these conditions and then going to a place, the “unknown” can oftentimes be frightening to people and I think being out there in the public helped them to understand what was going to be coming. So it put them a little more at ease, a little more comfortable and at peace knowing that the appropriate plans
were made for their child or for their children. I think that probably was really, really helpful.”

At Shady Creek, Principal Johnson wishes she would have taken more time for herself and her family that first year. “You have got to take time for yourself and I would have done that a lot more. I did not take a vacation that summer and I would have taken some time off but I didn’t do it. I would have planned a lot better; I would have planned more effectively that first year. Overall I think we did a wonderful job, but if I could change some things, those are the things I would do. I would have taken better care of myself. I put off my doctor appointments to get checkups. If the leader is not healthy, it is not good. I managed, I could have had a nervous breakdown it felt like or I could have run away, but still you have got to take care of yourself.” Additionally, she reflects on the benefit of spending more time in a school similar to the one she opened. “I wish I had spent more time there. Sometimes when you are opening up a new school you do not know what questions to ask until the kids started coming to the facility.”

If given the opportunity, Principal Jackson would “go back and do as many of those scheduling and paperwork tasks in advance. Looking back on that, it was a mistake. There was no way that I knew that I would have ............ issues in a new facility. I had no idea that it would be overwhelming as it was the first two months of school. Building issues....you anticipate a little but it was a lot and that took the first two months was just about exclusively building issues and that took lots of time, lots of time. When you come into a new school like this, I knew that I would have a lot of time with parents, but I had a lot more than I anticipated because parents do not know you, they are learning you and the
school, they are learning the culture. I talked to a parent about something every day so I underestimated the amount of time that I would have for those types of things.”

**Summary**

Each participant brought his or her own unique set of experiences and perceptions into their individual schools. These experiences and perceptions were the driving force behind the vision, mission, goals and norms the principals established at their newly opened elementary or middle school. Through selective hiring, professional development and modeling their own values and beliefs, each participant had a significant impact on the perceptions, experiences, values, and beliefs of their staff, students, parents, and associated stakeholders. The life experiences each principal shared through their interviews provide insight into what they value most, what they perceive as critical for maintaining an effective, purposeful school, and what they consider to be the major obstacles or pitfalls administrators should be aware of when opening a new school. By carefully examining their individual and shared experiences, future administrators, central services personnel, and community stakeholders can gain useful information to assist them in the tremendous task of opening a new school.
Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions


- Mr. Miyagi, The Karate Kid

Summary of Findings

Although the four participants arrived at their current positions through both traditional and non-traditional means, each one has unique experiences that administrators opening new schools would greatly benefit from hearing. Through the individual and group interviews, two central themes emerged as being crucial to the successful opening of a new school and development of a school’s culture. First, all participants stressed the importance of not only hiring quality staff members, but also working with the staff to continue their professional development and growth. Second, the participants encouraged future administrators to find balance in their lives between their professional and personal duties and responsibilities. A well-balanced administrator is able to set his or her priorities in such a way that both their professional and personal obligations are met without compromising the other.

The culture at each school began to grow and develop the instant the principal hired his or her first staff member. Additionally, the health and strength of the culture of the school is reliant on the health and strength of the administrator. Through the successful hiring and development of new staff members, and finding balance between professional duties and their personal life, administrators were the driving force behind the culture, good or bad, at his or her school.
Hiring and Developing Staff

Nothing is more important to the success of a school than the people in it (Lake, Winger and Petty, 2002). The people who make up a school – students, teachers, classified staff, administrators, parents, and community stakeholders – will either unite around a common goal or mission, or function as independent components going in different directions. Principals who build trusting relationships go a long way toward establishing a healthy school culture in which everyone works together. Principals do not gain trust because of the title on their door. They must earn trust by demonstrating faith in the independent skills and decisions of others (Alvy & Robbins, 2005). The first opportunity a principal opening a new school has to start building trust and developing the culture of a school is when hiring staff. By being honest about expectations for performance, participation, and ownership in the vision of the school, principals make it very clear that they are only interested in hiring the absolute best candidate and will accept only the best efforts of those chosen to open the new school.

The greatest predictor of student achievement is not student demographics, overall school spending, class size, or teacher salaries. The greatest predictor of student achievement is the quality of the teacher ("Investment in teacher quality pays off.” 2001). Hiring teachers who will promote high standards for all students is essential in improving achievement and equity in schools (Reeves, 2007). Principals must communicate to the potential employee their expectations for being a member of a team with a common vision, a team member who will also represent the school in a positive manner to parents and other community stakeholders (Alvy & Robbins, 2005). Fran Jackson, principal of Glenn Dale Middle School,
discussed the importance of developing a staff into a team who will support a common culture at the school: “Trying to create the school culture with a whole new staff was very difficult. We had a whole new staff. A lot of new teachers: we had some teachers who had been in Smith County schools but we had to bond and team and come together and these people, very few people knew other people. That was really challenging. We really have worked on teaming and bonding, so all of those things are challenging.”

Ideally, the best strategy is to hire staff who “already have their hearts, soul, values and goals invested in giving kids a world of good – staff who truly want to change lives and enrich the world” (Grayson, 2001, p. 41). Ted Jones, principal of East View Elementary, encourages administrators to, “Work hard to make sure you have some veteran teachers on your staff that can be teacher leaders and cheerleaders for the young teachers and give them guidance and give them support.” Susan Johnson, principal of Shady Creek Middle School, hires new staff members who are not afraid to ask for help if they need it: “I have had people come in and say ‘Well, I have no experience or it will be my first year.’ I can deal with that because as long as they learn and they have the right attitude and also I look for people that are impressive in that if they need help, they will ask for it.”

Most administrators would agree that hiring teachers is the most important decision they make. This decision has a greater affect on children than any other administrative decision. What a teacher believes and does as a teacher will either open or close doors to learning for students (Pillsbury, 2005). By using good interviewing skills and questions, the attitudes of potential teachers can be successfully tapped, which will provide insight as to whether or not the candidate is a good fit for a particular school. Principal Jones points out
the importance of allowing a candidate ample time to reply to a question during the interview: “One of the things I try to do is make sure that I have time to let a candidate talk so that it is not a rushed interview. (A former principal) or someone else told me that if you will let people talk long enough they will tell you what you want to know so I try not to cut people off when they begin to expound on an answer because sometimes without even meaning to they will tell you maybe what the answer to an unasked question is that reveals something about themselves on how they feel about people, how they feel about authority, how they feel about co-workers, how they feel about an inclusive culture.”

Lake, Winger, and Petty (2002) encourage administrators at new schools to “take time up front to think carefully and reflectively about the nature of the school and how its philosophy will play out in practice” (p. 14). This includes anticipating staff openings as the new school grows and develops. Given the arduous task of opening a new school, staff members may come to the realization that it is not for them. Shady Creek Middle School principal Susan Johnson relates that she had to “really work on the culture of the school because when you split a school and the way the school split there were certain teachers that moved here but they did not want to come.” In an effort to help ease some of the anxiety from teachers forced to transfer, she “promised them that if (the other principal) would take them back that I would let them go back.” The departing staff left several holes in the staffing of Shady Creek for the upcoming school year. However, Ms. Johnson realized that the culture of the school could be jeopardized by retaining staff that did not want to be a part of the new school. By hiring new staff in their place who were excited to be a part of the new school, Ms. Johnson dramatically strengthened the culture of Shady Creek Middle
School. No matter how wonderful the vision statement, or compelling a mission, or powerful the curriculum is, or clearly articulated the policies and procedures a school establishes, nothing can compensate for poor hiring decisions (Lake, Winger, & Petty, 2002).

The principal of a newly opened school must ensure that he or she assembles a leadership team from the new hires that are committed to the long-term success of the school. The leadership team in a new school has the tremendous task of helping the principal establish a direction, a course of action, and a culture for the new school. By starting with a manageable number of members, assembling members who share a common vision, and beginning the planning process in an adequate amount of time before school opens, the leadership team is in a better position to assist the principal in all aspects of opening the school. Principals should encourage feedback and input from their leadership team. Discussing, clarifying, and challenging fundamental assumptions about what a school is about is one of the important exercises of the leadership team (Lake, Winger, & Petty, 2002). Principals of newly opened schools should strive to create a leadership that is a diverse representation of the staff, both in terms of demographics and philosophies.

Tom Martin, Principal of Pine Bluff Elementary School, started the hiring process with a clear picture of the types of skills needed in the school, including a key member of his school’s leadership team. He focused his initial hiring on “what I perceive as being the most important leadership (position) within the school, the assistant principal was very, very important to me to spend time interviewing for the right person because I knew that person was going to be a major player in the school.” Principal Martin incorporated his key leadership personnel in the hiring of other staff members: “(I) hired someone in those
positions that you knew would be a leader and help you in hiring the other positions within that grade level.”

The school leadership team is crucial in helping establish and maintain a culture in the school that will promote high student achievement, positive community relations and high staff morale. Principals in newly opened schools should avoid trying to just open the school and then worrying about the details later. Whereas school administrators cannot anticipate every issue or circumstance that may pop up, working with the leadership team will help the principal develop a realistic and long-term plan on how to address those unique circumstances when they happen. Additionally, the leadership team is in the best position to assist the administration in sharing the expectations, vision, and mission of the school among the students, staff, and community. By working as a united team, the principal and leadership team will be better able to promote the intended culture of the school, while addressing the needs, questions, and concerns of the various stakeholders of the newly opened school.

**Balance – Shared Responsibility**

A principal’s job is “interrupt driven.” Instead of focusing on one task for an extended period, principals are expected to supervise lunch shifts, manage transportation, deal with parents, tend to discipline, handle budgets, and juggle a number of minor crises that may arise (Samuels, 2008). A crucial step in creating a balanced life for a principal in a newly opened school is to delegate responsibilities to other administrators, the leadership team, and teacher leaders at the school. However, in order for this delegation to work, the principal must help the staff develop and build the necessary skills to complete the tasks
successfully. The principal of Shady Creek Middle School, Sharon Johnson, reflects on the importance of delegating responsibilities to the staff: “It is hard to do that (delegate) because you do not know your folks and everything is not established, but if you know what you are looking for and you know what the end result is going to be, you can communicate more what you want, put more thought into what you need, what you want.” By sharing the responsibilities of governing and managing the school, the principal will establish a culture that is founded on mutual respect and trust.

Principals cannot, however, assume that the staff at the school already possesses all of the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully assume shared decision-making responsibilities. There is a clear need for leadership training for staff members at a new school. Many teachers are expected to respond to demands to assume leadership roles, but have had little training or preparation. When teachers are given the chance to participate in leadership opportunities at the school, their lack of participation or unwillingness to assume responsibilities is often viewed as disinterest from the staff. In many cases, this lack of participation is more reflective of the lack of experience, expertise, training, and knowledge of school leadership and decision-making processes (Creighton, 1997).

“The principal is the formal head of the school, but leadership is everyone’s responsibility” (Zellner, Jinkins, Gideon, Doughty, & McNamara, 2002, p. 7). Principals at new schools must help the leadership team and teacher leaders grow and develop into competent leaders. Establishing a culture of professional learning is crucial to this development. As Tom Martin explains, “We can’t just say ‘we are doing a great job and we can just maintain what we are doing’, we still need to move forward and continually improve
and find new ways, better ways, because we feel like the impact is not there as it should be but continuous learning on our part to strive to become better in all of our areas, striving to become better in parent involvement, striving to have our staff continuously learning whether it is attending Professional Development sessions, whether it is going back to get a master’s degree, whether it is National Board Certification.” Principal Martin has established a very clear expectation that Pine Bluff Elementary will maintain a school-wide culture that is rooted in continuous improvement and professional growth.

**Balance – Manager versus Instructional Leader**

Another form of balance for principals at newly opened schools comes in the form of their roles as building manager and instructional leader. “Successful principals must lead bifocally – taking care of both learning and business as they move through the day” (Alvy & Robbins, 2005, p. 52). It is a tough balancing act to keep improvement of classroom instruction at the center of the job while being barraged with administrative tasks. The principal’s success at a newly opened school will hinge on the staff’s acceptance of him or her as an instructional leader – their understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessments. Teachers take pride in working with a principal who is a strong instructional leader, and will follow their example in the classroom (Alvy & Robbins, 2005).

The primary function of the principal, as the instructional leader of the school, is to provide a learning experience for students. In reality, principals do not devote much time to the improvement of instruction, as their role of building manager encompasses so much of their time. The school principal is critical in setting the proper educational tone in the school, something that can only be done by an instructional leader, not a building level manager.
(Teitelbaum, 1990). However, assuming the role of instructional leader can be very difficult. Investigators who shadowed principals for a week discovered that the sheer volume of managerial duties allowed principals to spend less than a third of their day on tasks that involved interaction with students and teachers. Often, the contact that did occur was too short and unfocused to lead to real instructional improvement (Samuels, 2008).

There is a general tendency of school principals to allow the role of manager to take the place of their former role as educator, and their intended role of instructional leader. The role of instructional leader is frequently set aside by the principal because of the immediacy and pressure of everyday administrative duties (Teitelbaum, 1990). This day-to-day management function is magnified in a newly opened school, as principals have to address a variety of issues that emerge from not having time to establish set routines, policies, and procedures, as well as concerns with the building itself during the opening year. Rallis and Highsmith (1986) conclude that the disparity between the principal’s role as building manager and instructional leader is too great except the principal to be successful at both simultaneously.

Given the frequent interruptions and tremendous task variety that often characterize the principal’s day, combining leadership and management can be a challenge. With carefully planning, however, a principal in a newly opened school can combine the roles of manager and instructional leader. Principals exert leadership by effectively managing the new school. By ensuring that the building is a safe and clean environment, that teachers and students have the necessary furniture, equipment and instructional resources they need, principals model an expectation of focus, organization and setting priorities for the students.
and staff. This type of behavior, when demonstrated consistently, eventually becomes a part of the school’s culture (Alvy & Robbins, 2005).

**Balance – Personal and Family Responsibilities**

The success of a school often depends on the emotional attitude of the principal. Especially in stressful times, as when opening a new school, the eyes of the organization and community turn to the principal. Having the right knowledge and saying the right things are not enough. Staff members and students can tell what a principal truly feels (Alvy & Robbins, 2005). Tom Martin reflects on the strain between meeting his professional and family obligations: “I used to live school, live and breath it. I realized if I kept doing that I would have school but then I would not have anything else. School was very, very important to me and it became a priority but there are other things that are priorities too….mainly the church and other things too, so I have to balance my time as well as I can.” Sharon Johnson, Principal of Shady Creek Middle School, recalls she neglected her personal health, physical and mental, due to the pressures of opening a new school. “You have got to take time for yourself and I would have done that a lot more. I did not take a vacation that summer and I should have taken some time off but I didn’t do it. I would have taken better care of myself. I put off my doctor appointments to get checkups. If the leader is not healthy, it is not good. I managed. I could have had a nervous breakdown it.” By finding an appropriate balance and maintaining a healthy state of mind, principals in new schools help establish a culture of calm and reflective practice.

According to Connolly (2007), “Harried principals aren’t helpful principals. Schools need calm, well-balanced, helpful leaders as much as they need visionary ones.” Today’s
schools represent a new model – “everyone on the campus and in the community playing a part in making sure that no child is left behind academically, emotionally or culturally” (Zeller, Jinkins, Gideon, Doughty, & McNamara, 2002, p. 3) – and require a new model of leadership and governance in order to be successful. Principals should devote as much of their time to helping teachers be more focused and less frantic as they are to formulating new visions for the school or embarking on improvement initiatives. A harried, stressed-out principal can never be part of the solution. Ted Jones of East View Elementary School recalls the first year East View was open: “When I came home, which was often late at night, I was so exhausted that after a brief conversation with my wife I just went to bed and woke up the next morning and started doing it again. There just wasn’t enough time in the day to get everything done that needed to be done.” By better learning how to order, regulate and control the pace of the school day, principals will not only find more balance in their own lives, but help their staff be more focused and directed in their roles at the school (Connolly, 2007).

Connolly (2007) offers five tips for principals to implement that will help them find more balance within the school day:

1 – Gain better control of your daily schedule.
2 – Establish priorities.
3 – Develop a timeline for accomplishing your priorities in terms of years, months, weeks and days.
4 – Work to develop patience and perseverance.
5 – Learn to jettison any “excess baggage” that consumes too much of your time.
By more effectively managing their time, establishing and tracking priorities, developing patience and perseverance (within themselves and their staff), and learning to say “No” to unrealistic demands of their time, principals at new schools will be able to better balance their time, and that of their staff, and maintain focus on the primary task of the school, educating students.

Ted Jones, principal of East View Elementary School, shares a very emotional story of how he was forced to create more balance between his responsibilities as the school’s principal and his responsibilities as a newly-single parent: “I had a unique situation …… because I lost my wife to cancer and had an eight year old child so I had to make the decision then whether I was going to be a career man or be a father and have the best school to be the best principal or be the best daddy, and I just decided that I was going to be the best daddy that I could be and if what I had left over to give the school wasn’t enough then the superintendent could put me back on the assistant principal role.” Mr. Jones realized that his role as parent had to take priority to his role as principal.

However, the staff and community recognized his priorities and were very supportive: “a parent said, ‘What grade is your daughter in now?’ and I said ‘Well, she is in fourth grade and she is having her award ceremony starting right now.’” They said, “Why are you here?” I said “Because I have an award ceremony right here.” They said “Don’t ever miss your daughter’s award ceremony for our children. Your assistant principal can do it.” So from then on I never missed one and I never will.” With the support of his staff and community, Mr. Jones has found that essential balance between his role as principal and role as dad. He has proven that he does “have enough left over for the school” - East View Elementary is
consistently one of the highest performing elementary schools in Smith County, and Mr. Jones is revered as one of more respected principals in the county.

**Implications for Research & Practice**

Research on newly opened schools, and specifically the impact of establishing culture in those schools and how that culture will affect the long-term success of the school, is very limited. Whereas participants in this study were all from the same district, and there was no high school representation, the study revealed several areas that warrant future research. First, staffing a new school is a monumental task that requires a significant amount of planning time prior to the opening of the school. In the participants’ four schools, staffing came primarily in the form of internal transfers. Pine Bluff Elementary split with an existing school, resulting in the bulk of their staff coming from one school. Glenn Dale Middle School pulled students from nine different schools, with staff transferring from many of them to Glenn Dale. Several questions come to mind when examining the impact of these merged schools: What is the impact of forced transfers from one school to another? How are teachers transferred from one school to another selected? What professional development activities take place prior to the opening of the school to help build collegiality among the staff? Once school starts, what professional development activities are provided for teachers and staff? A new school will only be as successful as the staff that works there. This study revealed the vast importance of hiring, developing, and maintaining a highly qualified, dedicated staff. Future research can help determine the best steps to ensure this crucial step is not overlooked.
Second, more research is needed to explore the importance of balance in the lives of principals. The four participants in this study all shared the incredible time and emotional commitment they were required to make the initial year their specific school opened (Ted Jones - “the first year I essentially felt that I lived at (East View) and that I slept at home.”; Tom Martin – “I used to live school, live and breath it. I realize if I kept doing that I would have school but then I would not have anything else.”; Susan Johnson – “You have got to take time for yourself. I would have taken better care of myself. I put off my doctor appointments to get checkups.”; Fran Jackson – “It is a lot of physical hours as well. I never get caught up but I had to learn to balance family and home. This is a job that can consume you if you let it.”) As we have learned from the participants, finding and managing a balance between the immense responsibility of opening a new school and personal and family obligations is difficult. Further research questions to help determine best practices for finding this balance include: What time management techniques do successful principals incorporate into their day? How are the duties of building manager and instructional leader determined? Can the duties of building manager and instructional leader be merged, and if so, how? What role does the leadership team play in governing the school? What are community norms for the principal’s participation in both school and community events? What happens to the personal and professional lives of principals after they open new schools? What are the personal impacts and effects on principals who open new high schools?

Continuing to ask questions designed to provide a working knowledge of how principals who have opened new schools have been successful is a must. Each newly opened
school will experience their own unique set of successes, accomplishments and failures. By asking the right questions to the right people, principals opening new schools will have access to a body of knowledge that will help them avoid many of the pitfalls their peers have experienced before them.

**Lessons Learned**

In conducting this study, I learned a variety of lessons, both related to the research topic and about my own philosophies and practices as a student, principal, and district level administrator. Opening a new school is a mammoth task, one that is sorely taken for granted unless you are the administrator opening the school. The focus on opening the school should be on hiring staff, assembling a leadership team, developing both short- and long-term goals, helping ease the anxiety of students and parents transferring to the school, and preparing staff to deliver high levels of appropriate instruction to the students. Unfortunately, the bulk of the new principal’s time is spent making sure furniture is ordered and delivered on time, pleading for additional funds to provide the very basic of supplies and materials and meeting the deadline for opening the building. Allowing adequate planning time for the principal prior to the opening of the school year is crucial if the district expects the opening to be successful. A significant portion of this planning time should focus on working with the new staff to establish a vision, mission, norms, and a foundation for the type of culture the newly opened school wishes to promote.

Additionally, the district must take into account that the new school will not have accumulated the same materials and resources as a school that has been opened for several years. The planning budget must include additional funds to ensure students at the new
school have access to the same books, computers and multimedia equipment, and physical education and playground equipment as they had at their previous school. Students should not be deprived of the basic tools and resources they need in order to be successful.

Second, I learned a lot about the participants. Through the interviews and informal conversations, I have come to have a better understanding, and in some cases, a greater respect, of the individuals who accepted the challenge of opening a new school. All four participants provide visionary leadership for their schools. Each principal has a very clear picture of where they want their school to be in three years, five years and ten years. Two of the schools have been opened long enough to see the results of the principals’ vision. Two of the schools have only been opened a short time, but are beginning to see the results of the principals’ initial efforts. More importantly, all of the principals have clearly communicated their vision for the school to the staff and community stakeholders. They have established a culture of high expectations and accountability among their staff, students and communities.

The process of completing the dissertation itself was very eye-opening. Conducting interviews with a group of administrators was not as quick of an activity as I thought. It took almost five months between the first individual interview and the focus group interview (conducted last). I greatly underestimated the amount of time it took to assemble this small group. Also, I realize that my understanding of the processes, procedures and requirements of the University for completing the dissertation was lacking – again, I sorely underestimated the timeframe some of the different steps would take. Most importantly, the experience has helped me grow as a student. I have renewed my own sense of learning for the sake of
learning and being a better administrator, and not because I have to meet a licensure requirement or complete a course as part of my work duties.

From a professional standpoint, the research project has better prepared me in my role with Smith County Schools. By examining the best practices implemented and obstacles the four participants encountered during the first year their school was open, I am better prepared to assist future principals as they open new schools in the district. Additionally, as I work with teachers in the district who work at newly opened schools, I have a better grasp of what they are experiencing as they face the multitude of challenges of opening a new school. Finally, the project (especially through the interaction with the participants) has prepared me to be a stronger advocate at the district level for new schools opening in Smith County. I have developed a clearer understanding of the time, resources, and collaboration required to successfully open a new school. Hopefully, by being better informed, I can help the principals of new schools as they plead their case for additional funds and more time to schedule professional development activities with the new staff prior to the opening of the school.

Summary

As the population across the country continues to grow, the need for new schools to will continue to grow. Data from this study supports previous research by Peterson (2002) - “Schools that open in a positive way tend to stay that way” (p. 37). District should heed this advice as they prepare to open new schools. Administrators selected to open these schools must be chameleons. At any given time during the opening process they can assume the duties and responsibilities of a principal, counselor, architect, nurse, grounds keeper,
accountant, human resources director or custodian. Their job, regardless of the obstacles, is to ensure the school opens on time, fully staffed, with all of the necessary materials and resources needed by the students and staff. All too often the principals are not provided the necessary time, an adequate budget for necessary supplemental materials, or personal support from the district to accomplish this task. Careful fiscal planning, allowing for scheduled collaboration between principals who have opened new schools and principals who will open new schools, and modeling an expectation that the principal should not allow the opening of the school take over his or her life are all necessary steps school districts must take in order to ensure successful openings.

Additionally, districts are charged with providing principals time to meet with their staff prior to the opening of the school. This may require release time from a current teaching assignment within the district, or paying a daily rate to teachers outside the district. The new staff deserves an opportunity to get to know one another and time to establish the vision, mission, school-wide norms, and a foundation for the type of culture the newly opened school wishes to promote. This planning time is crucial to the long-term success of the school, and cannot be overlooked due to perceived time or financial constraints. The principal and staff deserve every opportunity to create a school with a culture rich in professionalism, community collaboration, and high academic standards. Students have the right to walk through the doors of a highly organized, well-managed school; a school with high academic expectations for the students and higher professional expectations for the staff.
REFERENCES


Sarason, S. (2002). *Questions you should be asking about charter schools and vouchers*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH.


APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

Guiding Questions –

- Describe your background in education, including previously held positions and your professional training.
- What lead you to your current position?
- Define “school culture”.
- Define “school family”.
- As you prepared to open the school, what were your biggest challenges?
- How do/did you involve the stakeholders (parents, students, community groups, the school district, employees) as a vision of the school was created?
- Where do you see the school in 2 yrs.? 5 yrs.? 7 yrs.?
- Who are the people you look to for guidance?
- Describe your school’s culture. How did you create it?
- Is it similar now to when the school opened? If it is different, in what ways? What accounts for the difference?
- What qualities, skills, or experiences do you look for in regards to school culture and school climate when hiring personnel?
- Explain the decision-making process in creating the school’s mission and vision statements?
- Explain the decision-making process in selecting the school’s mascot and colors?

These questions are designed to serve as a guide for the interview. As the participants respond, additional questions were asked.
APPENDIX B: Institutional Review Board exemption letter

North Carolina State University is a land-grant university and a constituent institution of The University of North Carolina

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From: Joseph Rabiega, IRB Coordinator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: March 10, 2008

Project Title: Creating a School Culture in Newly Opened Schools

IRB#: 107-08-03

Dear Todd:

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101. b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.

2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.

Please provide a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor.

Sincerely,

Joseph Rabiega
NCSU IRB

NC STATE UNIVERSITY