ABSTRACT

BARBOUR, NANCY NICHOLSON. Principal Leadership and Standards: Lessons Learned in Three Rural High Schools that Participated in North Carolina’s Turnaround Initiative. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli.)

Although most school turnaround efforts are at an early stage, building on lessons learned to identify conditions that drive success and resulted in effective turnarounds can continue to reform failing schools. There have been pockets of demonstrated success in turning around individual schools, with signs of promise that districts and states are making significant changes in their processes, structures, and strategies that will support the work of turning around large numbers of schools. While a significant amount of research exists that identifies the impact of principal leadership on school improvement, studies have not taken the standards used to evaluate principals and compared them with successful turnaround efforts.

The NC Standards for School Executives clearly identify the areas of a complex education system that a school leader must understand. While the standards are very detailed and have an emphasis on all areas of the school, a turnaround leader has to be able to identify which areas to change that will positively impact student achievement the fastest. The critical aspect aligning the standards with evaluation will be the ability for schools and districts to utilize the standards for a principal in a turnaround school and begin by prioritizing the standards upon which the principal will focus. To allow the leader to provide the laser focus on those standards and build a more successful program could be the pivot point to strategically developing a sustainable turnaround framework.
Principal Leadership and Standards: Lessons Learned in Three Rural High Schools that Participated in North Carolina’s Turnaround Initiative

by
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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to my extended family. Family as defined in some texts as a, “group of people united by certain convictions or a common affiliation,” can be a part of a person’s life because they are born into it or because they choose it. My family members both given and chosen have influenced my belief and convictions and continue to influence my day to day decisions and choices. Without their guidance, love, and direction I would not have made this or many other accomplishments and I am thankful for the gift of each one of them.

I also want to dedicate this work in memory of my greatest mentor, colleague and most of all closest friend, Marsha H. Person. Her influence, tough love and dedication to humankind are a model for educators and people alike. “You will never know the impact you had on my life and I hope in some way your passion for education and raising expectations for all public schools to educate every child, will somehow be carried out in part by my work!”
Nancy Evelyn Nicholson Barbour is the youngest daughter of John and Ellen Nicholson of Rocky Mount, NC. Growing up in Rocky Mount her parents instilled in her the importance of a personal relationship with God, family values and the belief that education is something no one can take away. Knowing all of her life she would attend college, she quickly realized working in education was the ideal match for her skills and her love for children. After obtaining her Bachelor of Arts degree in Early Childhood Education from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, she began her teaching career in Granville County. Working with all children was her passion and after a few years of teaching and the birth of her only son, William—her pride and joy, she determined it was time to develop a deeper understanding of how all children learned, especially those who struggled in a regular public school setting. Her next endeavor was the completion of a Masters of Education in K-12 Special Education from North Carolina Central University. From this experience and watching her own son grow and learn, her true commitment to the success of all students was born and her personal obligation to influencing public education continued.

Upon completion of her first master’s degree, she was selected as a recipient for the NC Principals Fellows program to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1998 to obtain her Masters in School Administration. After graduating in 2000, she served as an assistant principal, principal and central office administrator before moving to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction where she met her adoring husband,
Ken and currently serves as the Assistant Director of District and School Transformation focusing on turning around the lowest-performing schools in the state.
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Second only to Him, I thank my family who have shown their unconditional love throughout my entire life and without whom I would not be here to celebrate such a humbling achievement. To my daddy and mother, you are my rock-no matter what-good or bad, happy or sad, success or failure, you are there to guide, support, carry or celebrate with me and have given me more than any parent I know, asking nothing in return. You model and exemplify Christ in your life and are a true blessing and gift to me. To my husband Ken, my Prince Charming making sure my Cinderella moments keep reoccurring, you taught me the meaning of true love and believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. I know God brought us together and look forward to forever with you. To my “baby boy” William, of all the accomplishments in my life you are my greatest. Every day I see the man you are becoming; compassionate, honest, sincere, loving, and true to your faith and yourself. You live as an example to all and make me proud to call you “son”. To my sister Sue Ellen, you’ll always be the “smart one” and an example to me of inner strength; when life deals you struggles, you rely on your faith, tough them out and become stronger as a result. Finally, to my new extended Barbour family, thank you for welcoming me in with open arms; I will be proud to be Dr. Barbour.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................. x
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................. xi
Chapter One ......................................................................................................................... 1
  Introduction 1
  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................... 3
  Significance of the Study ................................................................................................. 7
  Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................... 10
  Overview of Methodological Approach ......................................................................... 13
  Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 17
  Summary 18

Chapter Two ....................................................................................................................... 20
  Common Elements of School Turnaround ...................................................................... 22
  Principal Leadership Standards, Qualities, and Competencies ...................................... 27
  Principal Leadership and Student Achievement .......................................................... 44
  School Accountability .................................................................................................... 48
  The Principal Selection Process .................................................................................... 52
  Principal Leadership and Teachers’ Perceptions ............................................................ 58
  Summary 61

Chapter Three .................................................................................................................... 62
  Methodology 62
  Explanation of the Appropriateness of the Approach .................................................... 62
  Specific Methodological Approach ............................................................................... 63
  Research Questions ....................................................................................................... 64
  Site Selection and Sample ............................................................................................ 65
  Data Collection66
    Interviews ..................................................................................................................... 66
    Electronic Survey ......................................................................................................... 67
    Document Review ....................................................................................................... 68
  Data Analysis 68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Validity and Reliability</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity Statement</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Schools and School Systems in the Study</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Principals’ and District Staff Findings about Turnaround</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Staff</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors Contributing to Turnaround</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Leader</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina Standards for School Executives</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnaround Principals</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Focus</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly Articulated Plan</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring Leader Advice</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick Strategy</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from Failures</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Perceptions of Turnaround Leaders</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Choice Response Analysis</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructed Response Analysis</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Working Conditions Survey Review</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of NC Standards for School Executives and Turnaround Principals</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Standards</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Research</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Develop a Pipeline of New Leaders................................................................. 122
Plan of Action ................................................................................................. 124
Data Driven Practices ..................................................................................... 126
Community, Family and District Support......................................................... 126
Flexibility of Standards and Evaluation............................................................ 127
Conclusion 129
References ..................................................................................................... 131
Appendices ..................................................................................................... 148
Appendix A: Letter to Superintendent .............................................................. 149
Appendix C: Interview Questions for Turnaround Principal ......................... 151
Appendix D: Questions for Teacher Survey .................................................. 153
LIST OF TABLES

Table I  Performance Composite Data for Each School in the Study 2005-2010 .......... 79

Table II  Summary of Multiple Choice Responses on Teacher Survey .......................... 97

Table III  Summary of Teacher Survey Responses by NCSSE .................................. 101

Table IV  Summary of Constructed Response Item 1 .................................................. 101

Table V  Summary of Constructed Response Item 2 .................................................. 103

Table VI  Summary of NCTWCS School Leadership Responses 2008 and 2010 High

  School 1 ................................................................................................................. 104

Table VII  Summary of NCTWCS School Leadership Responses 2008 and 2010 High

  School 2 ................................................................................................................. 105

Table VIII  Summary of NCTWCS School Leadership Responses 2008 and 2010 High

  School 3 ................................................................................................................. 106
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure I</th>
<th>Situational Leadership</th>
<th>31</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure II</td>
<td>Johari Window</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure III</td>
<td>Turnaround Model Graphic</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure IV</td>
<td>NC Principal Pipeline and Placement for Turnaround Schools</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure V</td>
<td>Balancing Standards and Turnaround Practices</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One

Introduction

President Obama said in his January 2010 State of the Union address, “In the 21st century, the best antipoverty program around is a world-class education” (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010, p. 10). Although most school turnaround efforts are at an early stage, building on lessons learned to identify conditions that drive success and resulted in effective turnarounds can continue to reform failing schools. There have been pockets of demonstrated success in turning around individual schools, with signs of promise that districts and states are making significant changes in their processes, structures, and strategies that will support the work of turning around large numbers of schools. In the field of education, choosing an effective school principal is one of the most significant decisions that a superintendent or school board can make, as new leadership can positively impact a school’s student achievement and move it forward in meeting its goals (Elmore, 2000).

Principals are responsible for setting school improvement agendas and teacher workplace conditions and ensuring that the school performs in accordance with state/national policies and community expectations. While a significant amount of research has been done identifying the impact of principal leadership on school improvement, studies have not taken the standards used to evaluate principals and compared them with successful turnaround efforts, hiring practices for teachers and leaders as well as perceptions of the teachers and leaders about the causes of Turnaround. This study will add to the current research providing the additional layer of comparison with the standards North Carolina has identified for evaluating principals, the North Carolina Standards for School Executives.
Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), school leaders are being held accountable by federal, state, and other outside entities for the progress and performance of every student in the building. The United States Department of Education has identified the significance of improving leadership, for example, Arne Duncan in his speech to the National Association of Secondary School Principals’ National Conference, named dramatic improvement to principal preparation and professional development as a focus for the second term in the Obama administration. He goes on further to recognize the complexity of being a principal and the importance of strong leadership in schools today (http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/supporting-and-strengthening-school-leadership). School districts have been charged with selecting principals who can reverse any trends of failing student achievement on tests and transform under-performing schools into successful, thriving institutions. Principals are expected to provide the necessary instructional leadership to ensure the success of all students (Quinn, 2002). Leaders of schools not only need to know what to do but why certain practices are important, when practices should be used, and how school and classroom instructional practices must be applied to improve student achievement (McIver, Kearns, Lyons, & Sussman., 2009).

A report by Mike Rose for American Federation of Teachers (1998) examined that “America’s public school system has always been one of its most important institutions, charged with preparing all students for responsible citizenship and productive adult lives” (p. 2). To create schools where all children can learn and be successful, the schools must face many challenges and obstacles. Lezotte (1994) suggested the notion that public schools failed to teach all students, especially children of the poor, to a high level of achievement. To
accomplish and overcome the challenges of providing equal opportunity environments to children from poverty, education related researchers have found significant relationships between effective schools and instructional leadership skills. Effective school research has been a topic of discussion in the educational field for decades. The significance of effective school and strong leadership cannot be denied in the midst of a very competitive 21st century. However, for any reform to be successful in public education, the selection of the instructional leader and the way these leaders are perceived by teachers should be carefully considered and understood.

**Statement of the Problem**

Year after year, the lowest-performing schools continue to struggle. Students do not master curriculum concepts and perform below grade level on state standardized tests. Many students fail to graduate altogether. We must set a course for turnaround and transformation if we are to help these chronically struggling schools and radically transform the education and skills students receive (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, Redding, et al., 2008). Leaders of these schools face daunting challenges. Improving student achievement requires effective leadership to transform school climate and culture, increase the effectiveness of teachers and staff, enhance the curriculum, engage the community, and gain parental support and trust.

In the 2006-07 school year the sixty-six lowest-achieving high schools were identified through their performance on End of Course tests. Their proficiency, percentage of students considered to be at grade level, ranged from 23.8% to 58.7%. Three separate
research studies have found the schools that were part of North Carolina Turnaround made gains in student performance that were statistically significant when compared to other schools. These studies document that the strategies used in North Carolina Turnaround do change student achievement outcomes. In a study conducted by Thompson, Brown, Townsend, Henry, and Fortner (2011), Turning Around North Carolina’s Lowest-achieving Schools (2006-2010), researchers found that North Carolina Turnaround made a significant contribution to improved student achievement. While growth was initially meek, continued support led to progressively larger gains over time. In Teacher Working Conditions and Turnaround Efforts in Low-Achieving High Schools, Banks, Bodkin, and Heissel (2011) found that the North Carolina Turnaround Program is associated with increased grade level proficiency on End-of-Course tests, improved school leadership and support, strengthened teacher leadership, enriched school culture, and increased time for preparation and collaboration. Findings from McFarland and Preston (2010), Evaluating the Effectiveness of Turnaround Efforts in Low-Performing High Schools show that the North Carolina Turnaround Program is associated with increases in school performance composites and reduction in the number of short-term suspensions.

As the federal and state accountability standards for schools are now receiving national attention, the focus on school success is heightened for school districts and states. Research has shown one essential component to realize improved student achievement is the leadership in the school (Cotton, 2003). Hiring an effective principal is challenging because a candidate’s leadership ability in a local school can be difficult to measure. In many cases, the success of new school leaders is contingent upon their endorsement by teachers, staff, and
community members (Lambert et al., 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004). The hiring criteria used by school districts when successfully selecting these leaders provide insight into the qualities a leader must possess to assist under-performing schools in becoming successful. In addition, principals face the task of being evaluated not only on the performance of their students but by teachers and their perception of their work environment and the conditions to do their job effectively. School leaders must be visionary and possess the ability to conceptualize goals for their schools as well as the ability to operationalize the necessary day to day duties. These successful principals understand the value of people. They value teachers as individuals and sincerely want them to succeed and grow (Charlotte Advocates for Education, 2004).

In effective schools, leadership practices were shown to have a direct impact on student achievement regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic demographics (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Selecting the appropriate principals to turn around under-performing schools is paramount. Identifying the criteria school districts use to select such leaders could provide insight to what characteristics and practices an effective leader must have to transform an unsuccessful school. Doug Reeves (2007) explains leadership in terms of change. He states, “Change leaders know that they do not change organizations without changing individual behavior, and they will not change individual behavior without affirming the people behind the behavior” (p. 27). By studying the changes a leader has brought to a turnaround school and further exploring the day-to-day practices of these principals, and their impact on teacher perceptions, advancement may be made in theory and practice on improving student achievement.
Likewise, once the criteria a school system has used to hire effective principals is identified, it may be of interest to determine the alignment of these criteria with national and state leadership standards, such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). The North Carolina Standards for School Executives has been in place since the summer of 2008, and can be instructive to determine which of those standards are being used when hiring principals for high needs schools. Currently, there are no studies that determine if alignment of hiring practices with leadership standards results in higher leader performance in high needs schools. In addition, this study will explore if the standards used for the principal evaluation truly measure the factors identified through hiring and day to day practice that turn a school around.

Additionally, the study explores how teachers perceive the practices of the principal and how these practices improve the academic performance of students. Teacher perception of leadership adds an additional lens from the classroom perspective where student learning is supported or hindered. Exploring the criteria district leadership uses in the selection of effective principals, the school leadership standards, and teachers’ perceptions of leadership qualities resulting in improved student achievement could provide insight for better developing state and federal principal standards and inform principal preparation and licensure programs.
**Significance of the Study**

Jim Collins (2001) suggests the singular person at the top does not result in permanent change and further suggests the balance needed for effective leadership depends on a school executive who “builds greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (p. 20). In school reform the principal is perceived as the instrumental factor for change (Leithwood, 1999). “These depictions of leadership often assume the leader is an independent actor and do not acknowledge the power or influence that constituents have in schools” (Gordon & Patterson, 2006, p. 227). Hart (1993) stated the belief that the principal maintains the source of power within schools by declaring, “The homage leadership receives in our culture and in literature leads many principals to conclude that they stand alone at the center of the ideas, planning, culture, and action that drives schools’ performance” (p. 143). From Hart’s perspective the principal is more of a traditional leader, working solo.

In the late eighties, Thomas (1986) emphasized the role of the principal to be one of reform and management. This belief, while common among some who study school leadership, does not consider the impact of transformational leadership involving people. While Anderson (1991) stated, ‘The principalship is probably the single most powerful force for improving school effectiveness and for achieving excellence in education’ (p. 84), Goddard (2001) shared that leadership depends on the “collective efficacy” (p. 17) and is essential for improved student achievement.

This study, looking closely at principal behaviors and skills, has identified specific practices for improving historically failing schools, defined as schools with less than 60% of
its students performing at or above grade level as measured by the state’s standardized testing program. Leadership is thought to, “Emerge through interaction with other people and the environment” (Spillane, 1999, p. 9). While considering these interactions, the findings from this study have identified similarities between leaders as seen through a discussion with the principals, the selection process used to select the principal as well as teacher input experiencing the change first-hand. The effectiveness of the leader depends on the ideals a leader holds for change. In order to successfully affect change, leaders must understand the psychological processes caused by change. The enactment of such change is influenced by the leader and as defined by William Bridges (1980) results in transitions that involve processes and experience. Murphy and Schiller (1992) suggest effective principals must have certain attributes saying, “The principal must continuously exude enthusiasm, optimism, self-confidence, and respect for all employees and reverence for the students’ potential” (p. 30).

Scholarship of educational leadership tends to provide historical accounts of what constitutes effective leadership at certain points in time. For example, while the managerial model of leadership was once considered ideal (Foster, 2004), it has fallen out of favor for leading current school reform efforts because it emphasizes top-down control through adherence to policies and procedures instead of building consensus. Similarly, instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 1999), another popular model, is quickly losing ground for leading school reform efforts because of what is now seen as its narrow focus (Leithwood et al., 1999, Murphy, 2004). Researchers have suggested that these shifts in leadership models have occurred in response to changing societal conditions (Bolman & Heller 1995,
Leithwood et al., 1999). The result has been a plethora of new leadership theories, including ‘transformational leadership’ (Leithwood et al., 1999), ‘democratic leadership’ (Glickman, 2002), ‘facilitative leadership’ (Conley & Goldman 1994), and ‘participative leadership’ (Yukl, 1994). The evolving tendency to theorize leadership has resulted in a continuous cycle in which a model is adopted, then replaced with another one, and eventually discarded as a viable model altogether.

A theory is not a recipe which, correctly followed, makes a leader successful. Nor is leadership an attribute belonging to the person in the formal leadership position. Additionally, one model of leadership does not meet the needs of every school community.

This study has identified characteristics and behaviors that contributed to reversing a trend of low student achievement. Instead of attempting to name a theory of practice for leadership, concepts and practices emerged and helped describe for current and future leaders practices that improved student achievement. Like Spillane et al. (1999), point out “theory is not so much a guide or template for the moves leaders should make, but rather a tool for helping leaders to think about and reflect on their practice” (p. 5). Leaders in different settings will use this tool in different ways and for different purposes.

While this study will concentrate mainly on three high schools that have historically had unsuccessful performance in student achievement and a change in leadership that resulted in improvements, findings may contribute to future leadership training so they might include some of the existing practices that seem to be consistent in school improvement. Since school improvement is such a complex issue, identifying patterns and trends in leadership practice, Fullan (2004) suggests, can be instrumental in building, “a leadership
repertoire that is equal to the challenges that organizations today are facing” (p. 71). The study could further help explain the interconnectedness of leadership and student achievement and begin to determine necessary practices of leaders attempting to reform failing schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

Principals are held accountable for the success and failure of their school and expected to build a professional learning environment focused on improving student achievement (Irby & Brown, 1998). Studies have shown that school principals are an influential factor in creating positive working conditions for teachers and likewise affect the ability to recruit and retain talented teachers (DeAngelis, Peddle, & Trott, 2002; Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2008). Second only to instructional quality, school leadership is the most significant school-related contributor to what and how much students learn at school (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

The first purpose of this study is to identify the role of principal leadership in school turnaround. Areas of focus include what components of the school changed after the new principal was hired. With the change in leadership, how did the day to day functions of the school change and what did the principal do to make those changes happen? How does the principal believe the school turned around once he arrived? What does he attribute to the improvement under his leadership?

The second purpose is to identify the criteria school district leaders use when selecting a principal to turn around a failing school. Although the importance of the
principal’s leadership skills in transforming schools has been well documented, the selection process does not typically include criteria for consistent assessment of these skills (Shipman, Tops, & Murphy, 1998). When school districts treat principals like interchangeable commodities, Portin, Schneider, DeArmond and Gundlach (2003) report a one size fits all approach is the result. They further agree this one size does not meet the needs of all schools and school children nor does it afford leaders the flexibility to prioritize areas of need.

According to Lambert et al. (2002), perceptions of teaching and learning have changed over the past ten years. Likewise, principal leadership standards have changed, shifting from a traditional management of people and resources approach to a deep engagement in instructional and community issues (Whitaker, 2002). With a laser focus on school performance and student achievement, hiring decisions must begin to focus on improving schools and building the capacity of school leaders, establishing standards for excellence in leadership.

To reflect these new expectations, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) revamped the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards in 2008. The ISLLC standards have been an integral factor in establishing a common language and framework for what school leaders should know and be able to do. From these standards, North Carolina customized its seven standards for school executives in 2008 adding an eighth standard in 2013 directly connected to student achievement and gains.

A third purpose of this study is to determine how the hiring criteria used by the three districts align with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. Selecting a new leader for a historically under-performing school is not easy and the complexity of school
reform makes principal selection even more difficult. With these new expectations for school principals outlined in the ISLLC standards, the practice of school leadership requires principals to make critical determinations about school capacity and find ways to institute and inspire improvement in teaching and learning. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve student achievement, grow teacher leaders, and institute sustainable change.

Because teachers can lead in a variety of ways, many teachers can serve as leaders among their peers. Teacher leaders can also be catalysts for change, visionaries who are “never content with the status quo but rather always looking for a better way” (Larner, 2004, p. 32). Teachers who take on the catalyst role feel secure in their own work and have a strong commitment to continual improvement. Teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support the school and student success and thus provide a different layer of insight to school building leadership. Therefore, the final purpose of this study is to determine teachers’ perceptions of the key aspects of leadership impacting successful change in three historically unsuccessful high schools. Then to determine if those perceptions align to the NCSSE upon which the principal’s evaluation is based.

The research questions to be considered are:

RQ1: What factors do principals believe attributed to the turnaround in student achievement for three high schools in rural North Carolina?

RQ2: What leadership factors do teachers believe cause schools to make significant improvement in student achievement?
RQ3: In what ways do the school executive standards align to the effective practices of leading school turnaround as identified in this study?

**Overview of Methodological Approach**

Through a multi-site case study, I plan to study three of the sixty-six historically low-achieving high schools in three districts in rural North Carolina that were identified by the judicial system as the lowest-performing high schools in the state based on the performance of students on state tests. Governor Mike Easley requested assistance from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to provide assistance to these schools. These schools were identified for intervention because their performance composites were below 60% for at least two years. A school’s performance composite is the percentage of students proficient on the End-of-Grade or End-of-Course tests, out of the total number of tests taken. The schools within each district that are included in the study have historically been under federal sanctions designated by No Child Left Behind, state sanctions as low-performing, and identified in the judicial system as schools that should be closed due to failure to successfully educate high school students. “The judicial action was a ruling by Judge Howard Manning, Jr. in the Leandro v. State of North Carolina school finance suit. Judge Manning held that North Carolina’s constitution obligates the state to give every child an opportunity to get a — sound basic education.” The judge defined a sound basic education not simply in terms of the educational services provided to students, but in terms of the skills and knowledge that students acquire. Nor did he set a low bar for the level of skills and knowledge entailed in a sound basic education. Rather, he held that students should graduate prepared to compete on
an equal basis for employment and postsecondary education. Whether students were making adequate progress toward a sound basic education could be measured by whether they achieved proficiency on the state’s End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests. By Judge Manning’s standards, a high school that was failing to enable at least 55% of its students to achieve proficiency was failing to fulfill the state’s constitutional obligation, and a school that persistently fell short of this bar deserved to be closed unless urgent steps were taken to turn it around. Thus, he ruled in 2006 that all high schools with performance composite scores below 55% must be assessed to determine why they were achieving so poorly and how they could be improved. This ruling became the spring board for the North Carolina Turnaround initiative. Soon thereafter, Governor Mike Easley raised the bar to 60%” (Thompson, Brown, Townsend, Henry, & Fortner, 2011, p. 2).

The North Carolina Turnaround initiative focused on three areas; developing a Framework for Action to change ineffective practices, high-quality professional development on research-based best practices to create school teams to re-culture schools, and intensive, targeted, and sustained coaching for successful implementation strategies learned during the professional development, As a result, significant change in leadership and instructional practice occurred which, in most cases, resulted in significant student achievement gains (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schooltransformation/turnaround/).

I used a qualitative methods approach with descriptive statistics that enabled me to study not only the current situation of the school but to learn its history and past performance on state standardized tests. Included in the study is research on various leadership approaches and competencies named as necessary for the twenty-first century by the North Carolina
State Board of Education (2006). In addition, I considered information contained within the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS regarding leadership), an anonymous survey administered to teachers every two years.

I also researched the North Carolina Standards for School Executives and discussed the current accountability system in place for schools. Furthermore, after discussing the hiring criteria with district level leaders I compared the qualities they look for in selecting school leaders with the North Carolina School Executives Standards utilized by North Carolina school systems to evaluate principals. The information discovered about the alignment or misalignment between the standards for evaluation and the hiring practices could assist in improving the evaluation system and contribute more to the professional growth of administrators. Finally, I compared the qualities and standards to the information gathered from teachers about their perceptions of what the traits or characteristics the principals possessed that caused the school to make such improvements and reverse the trend of low-achieving students. Likewise information learned from the NCTWCS for each school was reviewed to determine any patterns or relationships between these responses and the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. This qualitative method approach helped to describe any relationships between leadership practice, performance standards, and hiring criteria and practices by central office.

In considering a 2010 survey of school and district administrators, policy advisers, and others in the education arena, they named “principal leadership” as second only to teacher quality when they were asked to rank in importance twenty-one education issues, ranging from special education and English language learning to school violence and
reducing the dropout rate (Simkin, Charner, & Suss, 2010, pp. 9-10). Knowing the importance of leadership, I interviewed each of the principals and talked to them about their perceptions of their leadership style. The goal was to determine from their perspective what they see as their common leadership practices and their personal belief about leadership and how it plays out in their school setting. Based on their knowledge and experience with the North Carolina School Executive Standards, I discussed if they believe their success aligns with the standards. Included in the interview, we discussed the role the standards played, if any, in establishing a vision for the school and in reflection on their success.

After talking with the principals, I interviewed the superintendent or other central office staff members who selected these principals to lead the schools, specifically focusing on the criteria they used to identify principals and more specifically what characteristics they looked for in principal candidates. If the person responsible for the hiring at that time is no longer employed, I found the person to interview. Simultaneously, I conducted a survey of teachers who worked under the principals to see how the leadership practices actually played out in the daily operation of the school while also considering how these leadership practices and perceptions speak to awareness and leadership for moving not only the school forward in student achievement but also concentrate on specific subpopulations within the school.

The anonymous teacher survey will add another dimension to the study by including teachers’ perception of the leadership practices and the impact the practices had on school improvement. In an attempt to triangulate the data, I will identify patterns and trends between the selection of the principal by the superintendent and the day-to-day practices of the principal identified in the survey by teachers. I also looked at other information that emerged
about the leadership qualities both teachers and superintendents felt made the difference and resulted in academic gains for students.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions will be used in this study:

*North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*: the state level agency that supports the work in the Local Education Agencies (LEA’s) across the state.

*Local Education Agencies*: Most of the school systems are established by county or city lines with a total of 115 Local Education Agencies in North Carolina (www.ncpublicschools.org).

*Turnaround*: defined as changing a school’s performance as measured by their composite scores on state standardized test to above 60% proficient.

*Inter-State Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards*: Six standards for national school leaders.

*North Carolina Standards for School Executive (NCSSE)*: Eight standards developed in North Carolina based on the ISLLC standards for school administrator performance and evaluation.

*ABC’s of Public Education*: Set growth and performance standards for each elementary, middle, and high school in the state and focuses on strong Accountability, teaching the Basics with an emphasis on high educational standards, and maximum local Control

*North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey*: A statewide survey of teacher working conditions in five areas—time, empowerment, facilities and resources, leadership
and professional development—conducted on a biennial basis.

*Rural North Carolina:* Rural counties that contain fewer than 200 persons per square mile.

**Summary**

Arne Duncan asks, in his speech in 2009, if we can use this education crisis as an opportunity. He suggests, since we know the challenges, hardships, and difficulties, then we also know what is possible. Chapter 1 sets the stage to begin to look specifically at three high schools in rural North Carolina acknowledged for improving student achievement, reversing a trend of failure. The purpose of this study is to help identify effective leadership practices on assisting underachieving schools in improving student achievement. In identifying some of the terms and clearly establishing the significance of such a study, Chapter 1 has provided an overview and introduction to the proposal setting the stage for research into the recent studies related to effective principal leadership and perceptions of teachers on leadership practices that effect change.

By comparing standards used to evaluate principals to the hiring criteria and principal characteristics superintendents identify, this study will contribute to the research already in existence. The report, *How Leadership Influences Learning*, reminds us that, “Leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a genuine difference for all students” (Leithwood, et al., 2004, p.19). The report goes on to observe, “There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders. While other factors within the school also contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is the catalyst” (Leithwood,
et al., 2004, p. 5). The case study approach, talking to principals and central office staff and surveying teachers while paying careful attention to standards identified to measure effective leadership, Chapter 1 has established the stage for contributing to the research of school leadership and turnaround.

Chapter 2 explores leadership qualities and competencies that positively impact student achievement and how these are applied in high-need school populations. Included in the literature review are studies citing leadership practices that produce positive results for student achievement. Chapter 2 also explores the conditions of No Child Left Behind and the North Carolina ABC’s model legislation and their impact on schools underachieving and under sanctions. In addition, research on the validity of studies using perceptual data are reviewed to support the methods used in determining principal leadership efficacy through interviews of teachers and leaders. Finally, research is reviewed that connects leadership hiring practices to standards and that connection to student performance gains along with an analysis of teacher perceptions as obtained through a survey instrument.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

North Carolina Turnaround began as a response to the judicial ruling of Howard Manning requiring the state to provide a sound basic education. Governor Mike Easley asked NCDPI to assist schools in which student proficiency was below 60% as measured by the performance composite of the state assessment. In 2006-07, 35 high schools were identified and began Turnaround. In the 2007-08 school year, the Turnaround effort expanded to also include middle and elementary schools. In total, an additional 31 high schools, 37 middle schools, and 20 elementary schools became part of the Turnaround Initiative during 2007-08. In 2007, the Turnaround model replaced the former five person/one school assistance team model for Low-performing schools. From 1997 to 2006, 106 schools were provided five person assistance teams. In 2007-08, 123 schools were served within one year in the Turnaround design. In 2008-09, elementary schools were not served so 103 total schools were served by Turnaround. A significant difference between the two models is that an assistance team supported a school for a time period of one year; in contrast, schools in Turnaround receive support over a three year time period. Another difference is that more professional development is provided directly to teachers, principals, and central office staff. One of the lessons learned is the value of including central office staff in the planning process for schools.
High School Turnaround was designed specifically around a five step model. The first focus was to provide professional development for leadership teams from each school including a central office staff representative. Principals were provided with leadership coaches who spent time on the school’s campus providing coaching and support for implementation of change. Teachers were provided with on-site coaching from master teachers who modeled lessons, assisted with daily and long term planning and participated in newly established professional communities of teachers. A Framework for Action was developed by each school with required components of:

1. Plan for 9th grade transition,
2. Plan for formative assessment,
3. Plan for assistance to struggling students,
4. Plan for identifying and addressing literacy issues and needs
5. Plan professional development based on student achievement data,
6. Plan for reviewing all school processes and procedures to ensure that they are structured to help all students achieve proficiency,
7. Process for involving the total school community in addressing the needs of the school,

Finally, each high school was required to select a redesign or reform model as its Comprehensive Reform Model or CRM.

A review of the literature and recent research is included to identify information gleaned from studies of effective leadership. This chapter is divided into six categories:
(a) common elements of school turnaround, (b) principal leadership standards, qualities, and competencies, (c) principal leadership and student achievement, (d) school accountability, (e) the principal selection process, and (f) principal leadership and teachers’ perceptions of leadership.

**Common Elements of School Turnaround**

Schools are complex organizations composed of many different people. Turning them around is an involved, complicated process. The concept of turnaround requires significantly changing the expectations, beliefs, and practices of many diverse individuals, acknowledging people are normally resistant to having to make major changes, as well as changing collective systems, structures, and cultures. Fortunately, research and experience have shown that successful turnarounds share a number of common strategies. These common strategies, though often referred to with different labels, can be grouped into five general categories (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The five categories consist of leadership, improvement in instructional practices, curriculum, culture, and parent and community involvement (McKinsey, 2007).

The typical starting point for school turnaround begins with a skilled, strong, and committed principal who serves as the catalyst for change. The principal leads in the development of a vision for the school to dramatically improve student learning and engages the teachers, staff, parents, students, and community, often referred to as stakeholders, to share in developing and operationalizing this vision. The principal needs to function effectively in three basic roles: as instructional leader, to help improve teaching and learning;
as a facilitator of inclusiveness, to encourage all stakeholders to work in tandem to carry out the vision; and manager, to oversee the school’s non-academic functions (Chenoweth, 2007).

A central element of improving instruction is breaking down the traditional isolation of teachers in their own classrooms and getting them to work together on reviewing data on student performance, analyzing students’ work, developing lesson plans and assessments, aligning curriculum, etc. Teachers model good teaching for each other and learn from each other. The faculty members together accept responsibility for all students learning and engaging in a continual process of improving their own teaching. This shift in focusing on student learning and building capacity of educators is often referred to as professional learning communities or PLCs’ (Dufour, 2004).

A second critical strategy employed for improving instruction is individual mentoring or coaching by accomplished teachers or administrators, both for beginning and, where necessary, experienced teachers. More broadly, turnaround schools also provide other forms of professional development that meet the specific subject matter knowledge and pedagogical needs of a particular school’s teachers. Implementing a consistent system of effective teaching practices that engages students in higher-order thinking, problem-solving and communications, involves various kinds of student projects and work products, and effectively assesses student learning on each, is another key element. Teachers regularly collect and analyze multiple sources of data on each student’s learning, including classroom-based formative assessments, and adjust their teaching accordingly. Finally, principals closely observe teachers in their classrooms, help them improve their teaching, and encourage them to collaborate with other teachers. Teachers who are not motivated to
participate in the school’s turnaround efforts frequently leave voluntarily to avoid close scrutiny; if not, and they are persistently ineffective, they must be removed. The recruitment and retention of capable teachers who want to participate in the school’s reform contribute to the sustainability of the turnaround efforts (Kowal & Hassel, 2005).

To turn around students’ learning, schools must teach an intellectually challenging, rich curriculum that is relevant to the children’s culture and experiences and engages their interests, the third identified category. “The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers” (www.corestandards.org). The adoption of the CCSS allows schools to go to much greater depth and requires teachers to integrate literacy into their content instruction, a documented difficult task for most secondary teachers who have little to no training on good literacy strategies (Riddile, 2012).

The school climate is one of safety and orderliness, with a norm of high expectations that all students will achieve academically and behave properly, a challenging curriculum, high standards, pride in students’ work, and a friendly, supportive, collegial atmosphere. Staff are devoted to continually upgrading their instructional capability, take shared responsibility for all students’ learning, and provide extra personal and academic support to the students most in need.

Programs, such as ones for enhancing parenting skills, strengthen parents’ capacity to support their children’s academic learning at home and engage parents to become involved
with the school. Having the schools reach out to the parents increases the students’ motivation to learn and assists their studying, as well as providing the trust between family and school that would facilitate solving any student behavioral problems. Community members provide valuable academic services as volunteer tutors, adult mentors, and providers of enrichment programs for students. Finally, the schools have pupil service professionals who provide services directly for students with behavioral and other non-academic barriers to learning. They work closely with community health, recreation, youth, police, and other local institutions to address external student and family obstacles to students’ learning.

During the 2006-2010 period, NCDPI worked with 66 low-achieving high schools, 37 middle schools, and 20 elementary schools. These schools were targeted for intervention primarily because their Performance Composites fell below 60% for two or more years. A school’s performance composite is a percentage reflecting the number of End-of-Grade or End-of-Course examinations its students passed, out of the total number of examinations taken. Across the elementary, middle, and high school levels, local educators pointed to similar factors contributing to low performance:

- Challenging economic and demographic conditions, whether newly developed or chronic
- Serious and widespread discipline problems
- Low academic demands and expectations among teachers and low aspirations among students
- High principal and teacher turnover
- A negative school identity in the minds of teachers, students, and the surrounding community
- Ineffective school leadership, ranging from harsh top-down leadership to leaders who are too eager to please and fail to enforce discipline or follow through on decisions
- Alienated teachers marking time in survival mode, isolated within their own classrooms

When intervention by NCDPI and other partners was matched by spirited school leadership and district support, teachers took responsibility for student learning, overcame the challenges, and raised student performance, sometimes to noticeable degrees. The NC Turnaround Schools program of intervention included three basic components. First, a requirement that the schools submit plans consistent with a Framework for Action designed to focus the schools on changing practices thought to affect student achievement. Second, a series of professional development sessions designed to build the schools’ capacity to carry out the plans. Third, provide follow-up coaching and school-specific professional development, which continued for as long as the school’s performance composite remained below 60%. A subset of 13 high schools was also divided into separate, smaller academies in order to strengthen teacher-student relationships and facilitate other reforms (Thompson, et. al, 2011).

In the schools not making progress NCDPI discovered attempts at reform were undermined by stop-and-start reform initiatives with no sustained follow-through, continued principal and teacher turnover, principals who were unable to mobilize teachers behind
efforts to enforce discipline and step up demands for academic achievement, and breakdowns in basic policies and procedures at both the district and school levels. Without sustained, competent, and authoritative leadership at both the district and school levels, these schools were simply unable to break out of the cycle of low achievement.

Based on the success of the North Carolina Turnaround program which identified initially the 66 lowest-performing high schools in the state and later incorporated the feeder middle schools and lowest 20 elementary schools, the fourth pillar of the Race to the Top Grant was determined. The grant was an expansion of the program to address the lowest five percent of schools at each grade span, provide services and resources to the lowest ten percent of districts, and focus on high schools with a graduation rate of less than sixty percent (www.ncpublicschools.org/rttt). With this expansion, District and School Transformation’s focus is placed on increasing the identified schools to a minimum sixty-percent proficiency and develop sustainable improvements through strong leaders by building their leadership capacity. While the North Carolina Turnaround model was in existence prior to the Race to the Top grant and the development of the United States Department of Education’s reform model named Turnaround, the two models share some commonalities. One key aspect of both models is the necessity of effective leadership and the replacement of an ineffective leader.

**Principal Leadership Standards, Qualities, and Competencies**

It is tempting to get caught up in defining the many adjectives often used to describe leadership in education (e.g., participative, instructional) but ultimately these descriptions
focus on style, not substance. A more productive strategy is to examine three sets of practices that make up the essential core of successful leadership:

1. Setting direction
2. Developing people
3. Redesigning the organization

While these practices are rarely sufficient for leaders aiming to significantly improve student learning in their schools, it is evident that without them little improvement could occur (Leithwood, 2004).

Leithwood (2004) suggests that leaders who have a clear sense of direction have the greatest impact. If these leaders help to develop among their staff a shared understanding of the organization and its goals and activities, this understanding becomes the basis for a sense of purpose or vision. “Having such goals helps people make sense of their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context” (p. 10). In 2001, Tirozzi (2001) suggested effective principals establish a climate of excellence, display vision for ongoing improvement, and promote excellence through expectations of effective instructional strategies that align with the curriculum and are an integral part of the school improvement plan. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest that school improvement plans can be a means of setting direction. “It’s difficult for schools to make progress without something to focus their attention, without any goals,” says coauthor Kenneth Leithwood. “Improvement plans are a rational model about how to act purposefully in schools” (p. 11). Effective principals understand direction setting. They know that an investment of time is required to develop a shared understanding of what the school should
represent and what needs to be done to get it there (Hord, 1992). They know that teachers and other staff included in identifying goals are much more likely to be motivated to achieve those goals.

Much of the focus in education research regarding the principal’s role in developing staff members has been on instructional leadership, which emphasizes the principal’s role in providing guidance that improves teachers’ classroom practices. Philip Hallinger’s instructional leadership model has been the most researched. It consists of three sets of leadership dimensions—defining the school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate—within which ten specific leadership practices are delineated (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In addition to instructional leadership, researchers are also paying close attention to what is being termed a leader’s emotional intelligence—his or her ability and willingness to be cognizant of employees as people. Research by Kennedy and Anderson (2002) states that emotional intelligence practiced, for example, through a leader’s personal attention to an employee and through the consumption of the employee’s capacities, increases the employee’s enthusiasm and positive attitude, reduces frustration, creates a sense of mission, and as a result of these positive changes causes an increase in positive performance of teachers. Kennedy and Anderson (2002) further suggest that leadership practices that help develop people are also intellectually stimulating, supportive to the individual, and provide an appropriate model from which to follow.

The organization teachers and principals operate in can sometimes spoil their best intentions to use effective practices. In some contexts high-stakes testing has encouraged a
drill-and-practice form of instruction among teachers who are perfectly capable of developing deep understanding from their students through engaging lessons that are not only relevant to the students’ life but follow a standard curriculum (Leithwood, 2004). Leithwood (2004) also shares for the consideration of school leaders that “extrinsic financial incentives for achieving school performance targets, under some conditions, can erode teachers’ intrinsic commitments to the welfare of their students” (p. 11). However, successful educational leaders resist these and other organizational pitfalls. Instead, they are purposeful about turning their schools into effective organizations by developing and depending on contributions from staff, students, and families to support and strengthen the school’s culture, create organizational structures that support and expect high student achievement, and work collaboratively to address all student needs within the organization (Jackson, 1987).

Studying variations and similarities in principals’ perceptions of the conditions that must be addressed in high-poverty, low-performing schools can provide insight about how organizational leadership should be differentiated in order to maximize the likelihood of organizational effectiveness (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). If situations facing leaders vary significantly then a differential approach to leadership may require specific skills. The theoretical basis for differentiated leadership derives from Hersey and Blanchard’s (1969) work on situational leadership. They posited that leadership was composed of two dimensions involving direction and support. The need for direction and support was presumed to vary across organizational settings, thereby necessitating different leadership styles. The necessary levels of direction and support reflected the competence and commitment of subordinates. In one situation, the need for direction and support was high
because subordinates lacked both competence and commitment. Three other situations were addressed by Hersey and Blanchard -- those characterized by high need for support and low need for direction, high need for direction and low need for support, and low need for direction and support (See Figure 1).

![Situational Leadership Diagram]

Figure I Situational Leadership

Hersey and Blanchard were not the only theorists to recognize the possibility that leadership might vary depending on the circumstances. Fiedler (1964) suggested that leadership style depended on three situational variables: the relations between leader and subordinates, the nature of the tasks to be accomplished, and the amount of power to reward and punish possessed by the leader. Fiedler referred to his work as contingency theory because a leader’s effectiveness was contingent on how well their style fit the situation. What has been relatively scarce in the literature on school leadership is empirically-based research on the situational variables that newly assigned principals perceive they must address in order to raise performance in their schools. Reeves, McCall, and MacGilchrist (2001) “are
persuasive in contending that a leader’s perception of a situation—what he or she attends to in their school and the wider environment—exerts a substantial influence on their actions. From their perceptions are derived the sense of direction that is so crucial in school improvement efforts” (p. 134).

According to Leithwood and Duke (1999), a contingent leadership model "assumes that what is important is how leaders respond to the unique organizational circumstances or problems which they face as a consequence of, for example, the nature and preferences of coworkers, conditions of work, and tasks to be undertaken” (p. 39). The consistencies in conditions argue for an emphasis on a common set of challenges in turnaround leadership, and the variations in conditions suggest the need for additional specialized skill sets for use in specific school settings. The creative integration and organization of the necessary skill sets for any given school setting with its own unique combination of strengths and weaknesses continues to imply a need for contingent leadership (Fiedler, 1967).

Schmoker (2006) suggests a redefining of leadership. He proposes an understanding of teamwork and providing teams with the resources and support they need to become problem solvers is essential to success. Earlier, Collins (2001) stressed effective leaders must see what is essential and ignore the rest. Collins (2001) and Schmoker (2006) agree that leaders need to make a thorough, evidence-based case for effective instruction, for monitoring to ensure high-quality curriculum in every classroom. They also conclude that there must be a focus not only on the curriculum being taught but being learned as well.

In redesigning the structure of schools and this focus on what is being learned, No Child Left Behind has made apparent that principals often are required to operate as change
agents in schools (Lashway, 2003). Wagner et al. (2006) stated, “the problem is less about a ‘rising tide of mediocrity’ than about a tidal wave of profound and rapid economic and social changes, which we believe are not well understood by many educators, parents, and community members” (p. 3). Their book describes a multitude of complex issues that must be addressed through change leadership to effectively transform our schools and make the systems of schools work for all students (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Cuban (2004) emphasizes the terms incremental and fundamental which he relates to first and second-order change. He states, “The goal of fundamental change is to transform and alter, permanently, the basic structural framework of the system. The underlying assumption of incremental change is that the existing structures do not need to be changed” (Cuban, 1996, p. 76). Fullan (2005) calls for leaders who are focused on the shared responsibility for change. He suggests the need for principals who can “create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself” (p. 15). The research around change in schools focuses not only on the leadership but also on the culture and adaptability of the organization as a whole (Heifetz, 2004). This shift in ownership and accountability has stretched the need for a focus on standards and competencies of school leaders.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensures Consortium (ISLLC) developed standards in 1996 based heavily on the research connections between educational leadership and productive schools, especially when measured by outcomes for children. Further, they sought out significant trends in society and education that had implications for new views of leadership — and how the standards might give meaning to new perspectives on leadership (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996).
Clear and consistent standards and expectations built into a statewide education system can be a core predictor of strong school leadership. Based on updating 1996 ISLLC standards, the 2008 ISLLC standards reflect new information and lessons learned about school leadership (CCSSO, 2008). Standards are the basis for and can inform all components of a cohesive system—preparation, licensing, initiation, and professional growth and development. They can help states set expectations for licensure, guide improvements in administrator preparation programs at colleges and universities, and influence the process for screening and hiring leaders (King, 2004). Equally important, standards set a framework for developing assessments, expectations of practice, and content for professional training to facilitate improvement in practice toward expert performance (Van Houten, 2003). In addition, they can inform state policy makers in adopting policies and standards for new leaders as well as veteran school administrators. These standards can help to define expectations for leaders to grow professionally and identify effective or ineffective performance of veteran principals. Finally, the standards can help states create a conjoined set of supporting policies and activities that reach across the career gamut of an education leader (CCSSO, 2008).

North Carolina adopted their School Executive Standards from the six ISLLC standards of leadership. The six standards include: (a) development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community, (b) advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, (c) ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and
effective learning environment, (d) collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources, (e) acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner, and (f) understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

These standards are intended to support districts in the selection and development of school leaders who move schools into the 21st century and prepare students to be competitive in a global, changing economy (NCSBE 21st Century Goals, 2006). The standards were developed based on the expectations of a new vision for school leadership and a collective set of beliefs about the future of public schools.

The standards highlight the following new and significant roles that school-level leaders play in establishing conditions for high quality instruction and organizational learning:

- Strategically allocate staffing and other resources to areas of high need
- Closely monitor teaching and learning quality
- Establish and maintain a vision and focus on a core set of organizational goals
- Build trust and professional community among educators
- Ensure that schools are safe learning environments for students and staff
- Use data to reflect upon and improve classroom and organizational practices

The beliefs or philosophical foundations address eleven characteristics the North Carolina State Board of Education (SBOE) believes are paramount in leading schools in the 21st century. These eleven beliefs can be summarized as follows: (a) proactive leadership, (b) transformational leadership for sustainable improvement, (c) leadership focused on
learning for all students, (d) leadership is a practice for all levels in a school, (e) relationships are at the core of leadership, (f) leaders create processes and systems for progress, (g) leaders must select and develop strong staff members, (h) leadership is complex and systemic, (i) leadership systems within a district must be aligned, supportive, and collaborative, (j) leadership includes direction setting, motivation and alignment with improvement, and (k) matching leadership to the person is critical (NCSSE, 2006).

The purpose of establishing the standards was to offer school leaders a guide for continually monitoring their professional growth and development. While the standards are quite extensive there is not an expectation that one person would possess all of the characteristics but that they might be used as a guide in establishing a leadership team of complementary skills. The standards were also created to assist school executive programs in preparing leaders, provide districts with a focus, guide professional development programs for school executives, and offer a tool for the development of mentoring programs for new school executives (NCSSE, 2006).

The standards used as the framework for North Carolina are borrowed from a study from the Wallace Foundation entitled, Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship (Portin et al., 2003). This study looked at the practices of principals in schools. The study is grounded in actual practice and was written in a narrative case study format. The general consensus from the study supports the concept of distributed leadership and stresses the importance of collaboration and consensus building. The importance of distributed leadership is further evident in the intent that the standards not be regarded as isolated competencies. Rather, the standards impact each other and emphasis is placed on
ensuring that leadership happens in all seven areas but not necessarily provided only by the school executive.

The standards include the following: (a) Strategic Leadership, (b) Instructional Leadership, (c) Cultural Leadership, (d) Human Resource Leadership, (e) Managerial Leadership, (f) External Development Leadership, and (g) Micro-political Leadership (NCSSE, 2006). In 2012, an addition standard was added to include Academic Advancement Leadership (NCSSE, 2012). Within each standard are identified practices of an effective school executive and suggestions of artifacts that could be used to show competency within that standard. In the following paragraphs each standard is more clearly defined with examples of practices that may be used as examples of the aforementioned strategies being implemented (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectiveness-model/ncees/principals/materials/principal-manual.pdf).

Strategic leadership is summarized in the standards as the ability to “create conditions that result in strategically re-imaging the school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st Century” (NCSSE, 2006, p. 3). Brian Caldwell (2006) aligns strategic leadership with distributive leadership and suggests the need for multiple opportunities to utilize such leadership both within the school as well as within the district. Gorton, Alston, and Snowden (2007) add another dimension to strategic leadership applying it directly to decision making. They suggest that strategic decision making should be a part of leader preparation programs and could focus on training in “sensing opportunities and problems, diagnosing the situation and generating alternatives, and, of course making that all important choice” (p. 51). ISLLC
(1996) ascertains that strategic leadership is inclusive of plans, theories, data-collection and analysis, communication, and consensus building with negotiation.

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of strategic leadership include vision, data collection and analysis, a focus on 21st century skills, and communication about the professional beliefs about schools, teaching, and learning. The focus on teaching and learning in all practices shifts the school mission to begin to develop programs and practices that support all students learning and develop leadership throughout the school (NCSSL, 2006).

Instructional leadership is grounded in the establishment of high standards for teaching and learning. “The school executive must be knowledgeable of best instructional and school practices and must use this knowledge to cause the creation of collaborative structures within the school for the design of highly engaging schoolwork for students, the on-going peer review of this work and the sharing of this work throughout the professional community” (NCSSL, 2006, p. 3). Hallinger (2005), whose instructional leadership model has been widely researched, stated that instructional leadership “consists of three sets of leadership dimensions—defining the school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate” (p. 3). Leithwood et. al. (2005) supports the importance of instructional leadership but list it only as a second to classroom instruction. Fullan (2005) utilizes a term, “deep learning” (p. 22), which suggests leaders must create “collaborative cultures of inquiry that alter the culture of learning in the organization away from dysfunctional and non-relationships toward the daily development of culture that can
solve difficult or adaptive problems” (p. 23). Instructional leadership can therefore have multiple meanings within the school environment.

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of instructional leadership focus on teaching, learning, and student engagement. Leaders must also engage in reflective conversations that guide teachers to focus on student learning. This reflective questioning between teachers and school leaders is utilized in the Downey model and supported throughout the text in *The Three Minute Classroom Walk-through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time* (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, Poston 2004). These authors suggest the practice of reflective inquiry helps build teachers’ confidence and encourages reflection on teaching and learning. The standards also suggest a practice in continued curriculum alignments and utilization of student data for improved instructional practice. Lastly, included in instructional leadership is also a close look at the allocation of resources to support instruction and the frequent conversations with students about their own learning.

Cultural leadership relies on an understanding and belief in the important role of the school’s culture. “School executives must support and value the traditions, artifacts, symbols and positive values and norms of the school and community that result in a sense of identity and pride upon which to build a positive future” (NCSSE, 2006, p. 4). The Hay Group defines culture as “the things that people agree are true and agree are right” (Fullan, 2005, p. 57). Leithwood supports the importance of positive school culture by stating, “school…cultures enhance teaching and learning when the goals for teachers’ work are clear, explicit, and shared; when there is little conflict in teachers’ minds about what they are
expected to do; and when the atmosphere in the school is generally positive and friendly” (2007, p. 188). Fullan (2005) suggests the concept of culture helps people create new forms of learning and are imperative in sustainable reform.

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of cultural leadership focus on a collaborative work environment with shared values and beliefs as well as a common vision for the school. Communication, visibility, and empowerment of the school leader are also evident where the staff, students, and the community feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing. A final evidence is the focus on continuous improvement and is known through the school improvement plan and practiced in the school’s daily routine.

Human resource leadership speaks to the establishment of professional learning communities that “ensure that processes and systems are in place that result in the recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development, and retention of a high performing staff, and engage and empower accomplished teachers in distributed leadership” (NCSS, 2006, pp. 4-5). Rebore (2003) suggests these human relations skills are paramount if administrators are to be effective and survive in their position over time. He also acknowledges the presence of human relation skills that filter across all areas of leadership and are rooted in relationships between people. Gorton et. al (2007) suggests the importance of a school leader’s focus on equity. “A principal must be sure that subordinates perceive fairness in the amount and type of work each is responsible for and fairness in the results of this work that could be in the form of recognition, formal evaluations, and pay incentives” (Gorton et. al, 2007, p. 127). Jerome Murphy argues the challenge for leaders is to be responsive while building a sense of responsibility in others. He suggests this approach is
accomplished through encouraging people to take risks and supporting them when they are not successful. He further states, “it means working hard to make other people successful and giving them the credit” (Murphy, 2000, p. 124).

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of human resource leadership include the establishment of professional learning communities, support for continued adult learning, and the fair manner of evaluation for staff. The standards also suggest professional development aligned with instructional goals based on a variety of data is crucial for continued improvement. There is a clear focus on the support for new teachers and the importance of leadership among the staff across all levels (NCSSE, 2006).

Managerial leadership includes systems involving budget, staffing, and scheduling. The standards state the school leader “must be responsible for the monitoring of the school budget and the inclusion of all teachers in the budget decisions so as to meet the needs of every classroom” (NCSSE, 2006, p. 5). The management side of leadership has been regarded as the conflict leaders face to becoming more focused on instruction. Wagner et al. (2006) refer to a study of 10,000 principals which yielded a concerning response that 86 percent of the principals spend part of their day addressing school facility issues while only 53 percent spent part of their day with student learning. Balancing management and leadership requires careful attention to vision and collaboration while focusing on the systems and procedures necessary to reach the vision (Harris, et al., 2003).

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of managerial leadership address creating a balanced budget and establish processes to identify and solve conflict in a democratic way. Management must also address effective scheduling, optimizing learning for
all learners (NCSSE, 2006). Wagner et al (2006) also suggests the managerial practices should be focused and prioritized but should not override the importance of other leadership areas.

External development leadership addresses the system needed to involve the community in support of the school. “The leader proactively creates with staff opportunities for parents, community, and business representatives to participate as stakeholders in the school such that continued investments of resources and goodwill are not left to chance.” (NCSSE, 2006, p.6). Kohn (1999) suggests this external development begins with straightforward conversations with parents. This dialogue can include the student and begin to develop external support for the school. A study completed about parental involvement suggested the involvement must be considered as more than just school site events. Their parent involvement piece focused on other ways parents might be involved with discussions, homework help, time management, and expectations for achievement. This study suggests parent involvement should continue to be a focus because of its association with student achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of external development leadership are: clear systems that engage all community stakeholders in sharing responsibility for student and school success; provide opportunities for dialogue among teachers and families about the achievement of the child on a regular basis; and define clear expectations for parent and community member involvement in making significant decisions about the school.
The micro-political leadership standard expects school leaders “to build systems and relationships that utilize the staff’s diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power and influence to realize the school’s vision for success while building social cohesion and distributed governance with shared decision-making” (NCSSE, 2006, p. 6). “These shared governance systems appear to promote better communication, buy-in from stakeholder groups, and contribute to successful schools” (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004, p. 156). Conley (2003) suggests this shared leadership brings about a challenge for principals. He discusses the challenge as to keep teachers motivated and focused on learning while developing leaders while they are followers.

The practices North Carolina recognizes as evidence of micro-political leadership include the use of a team for school improvement plan development. The school leaders are visible and available to staff and design systems that are transparent when managing human and fiscal resources equitably. The practices in this standard encourage people to express opinions and provide processes and protocols to buffer and mediate staff interests. A final key practice is the focus on vertical and horizontal communication throughout the school that focuses on student learning and ways to improve classroom instruction (NCSSE, 2006). This among all of the standards necessitates learning environments where teachers can talk about teaching and focus on learning. It also supports how their involvement in leadership can reform their perception about teacher, leading, and learning.

The standard for Academic Achievement Leadership expects “the school executive will contribute to the academic success of students. The work of the school executive will result in acceptable, measurable progress for students based on established performance
expectations using appropriate data to demonstrate growth. The school executive practices effective academic achievement leadership when he or she demonstrates acceptable school-wide growth as calculated by the statewide growth model for educator effectiveness” (http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/effectivenessmodel/ncees/principals/materials/principal-manual.pdf). This standard then directly links the principals’ performance evaluation with the performance of the students based on the state’s accountability model.

North Carolina has made efforts to move toward a focus on school executives who hold the competencies they feel are necessary to support 21st century schools. These competencies include communication, change management, conflict management, creative thinking, customer focus, delegation, dialogue/inquiry, emotional intelligence, environmental awareness, global perspective, judgment, organizational ability, personal ethics and values, personal responsibility for performance, responsiveness, results orientation, sensitivity, systems thinking, technology, time management, and vision. Kohn (1999) suggests when these competencies are focused on teaching and learning, and students have an opportunity to show what they already know, schools can begin to practice many of the aforementioned competencies in the classroom as well as in administration.

**Principal Leadership and Student Achievement**

Addressing the individual needs of students can seem to be an impossible dream. In order to move this notion from a dream to reality the focus of classroom instruction must incorporate a newly identified set of the 3 R’s. Whereas reading, writing, and arithmetic have historically been known as the 3 R’s, more recent research focuses on a different set of 3 R’s—rigor, relevance, and relationships (Dufour, 2004). This shift from content-based pedagogy
to a more reflective area of focus includes attention not only to the content but on the learner
and how what is being learned relates to the current life situations as well as the interactions
a person will endure outside the school’s walls (Marzano, 2004). The focus on these three
R’s appears to address student achievement outside of standardized tests and focuses on the
“whole child” (Montessori, 1965).

Gerzon-Kessler (2006) indirectly addresses the notion of rigor, relevance, and
relationships from more of a practical point of view. He identifies five areas of focus
teachers must follow in order to expect and achieve high performance from their students.
Learning should be an integral part of students’ lives and in order to accomplish anything
students must have diligence, discipline, and high expectations. As Aristotle put it, “We are
what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit” (p. 47). A key
component of student success then is extensive practice with challenging material. In order to
support students in rigorous work, Gerzon-Kessler further suggests the relationship and
rapport students have with teachers and administrators should support their success.

Relationships simply encourage the school faculty and staff to know the students
beyond the classroom. Beginning to meet the students and identifying with them as people
with likes and dislikes outside of academic material bonds the students to the school
(Wagner, et al., 2006). The relationship aspect also stretches beyond the classroom to
building relationships outside the school with business partners for improved education.
Making connections for students to develop relationships within and outside the school
moves the focus beyond just curriculum into standards for knowledge and life. The current
Common Core adopted by forty-five states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the
Department of Defense are designed to be strong and relevant to the real world, a reflection of the knowledge and skills that students will need for success in college and careers (www.corestandards.org).

The rigor, relevance, and relationships students need to be successful can be modeled by school leadership through the promotion of the same among staff, students, parents, and the community. The North Carolina State School Board identified the need for relationships in their December, 2006 board minutes stating, “Leaders bring their ‘person’ to the practice of leadership. Matching the context of leadership to the ‘person’ of the individual is important to the success of the leader” (p. 1). This personal side of leadership along with the emphasis placed on relationships within the school can have a direct impact on student achievement.

Barth (1990) asserted that when principals, teachers, and students learn together, everyone has the potential to join with others at some time to play a key role in leading an important aspect of the school’s work. He emphasized that principals, teachers, and students need to be supported in their own learning as they acquire new ideas and insights about the complex tasks that make up their complicated roles and in-depth curricula. Lambert (1995) concurs by further describing leadership as a reciprocal process that takes place within relationships in communities; it cannot be limited to a set of behaviors attributed to and performed by an individual leader. Hence, the inevitability of relationships within schools is apparent and must be present if effective change is to occur (Marzano, 2005).

The North Carolina Standards for School Executives, adopted by the State Board of Education in December, 2006 also recognize the need for school executives who are adept at
building relationships with staff, students, and parents and utilize the collective expertise and experience these people possess. By establishing powerful relationships the state board feels school leaders are able to tap into and stir the passions teachers have for children and children have for learning. The standards specifically state,

Out of these relationships the executive must create among staff a common shared understanding for the purpose of the work of the school, its values that direct its action, and commitment and ownership of a set of beliefs and goals that focus everyone’s decision making. The staff’s common understanding of the school’s identity empowers them to seek and build powerful alliances and partnerships with student parents and community stakeholders in order to enhance their ability to produce increased student achievement. (NCSSE, 2006, p. 1)

A recent study by Gregory Branch, Eric Hanushek, and Steven Rivkin (2013) suggests strong leadership is essential for revitalizing failing schools. The study discusses impact of principal leadership as measured in student gains. They suggest the influence on school quality can be measured through teacher turnover and the best principals showed a higher teacher turnover rate in grades in which teachers were least effective. They also found evidence in the study that the instability of leadership can impede the improvement of low-performing schools and often these ineffective principals move to different schools repeating the pattern of low-performing in other areas. “This pattern,” they conclude is “particularly pronounced in high-poverty schools (p. 69). Finally they suggest, “for student outcomes, greater emphasis on the selection and retention of high-quality principals would appear to have a very high payoff” (p.69).
School Accountability

No Child Left Behind (2001), a reauthorization of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), established stronger accountability for student achievement results. This legislation is based on a focus on creating more freedom for states and communities to utilize research-based teaching methods and allow parents a more active voice in educating their children. Specifically, the four focus areas identified in the legislation include accountability for all students, flexibility within states and districts, a focus on educational programs that have proven to be effective through research, and providing options for parents to choose schools with high academic results (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

States are always trying to close the achievement gap and ensure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve proficiency in tested academic areas. The No Child Left Behind legislation placed an emphasis on school systems determining which educational programs and practices have been proven effective through rigorous scientific research. School districts were given the autonomy to research their individual schools’ needs and target federal funding to support these programs and teaching methods that work to improve student learning and achievement. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years were eligible to receive supplemental educational services, including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. Also, students who attended a persistently dangerous school or were the victim of a violent crime while in their school had the option to attend a safe school within their district (No Child Left Behind, 2001).
The North Carolina State Board of Education developed the ABCs of Public Education in response to the School-Based Management and Accountability Program (SB 1139) passed by the General Assembly in June 1996. “The ABCs focused on strong Accountability with an emphasis on high educational standards; teaching the Basics; and maximum local Control” (The ABCs of public education, Executive Summary, November 6, 2007). An accountability model for elementary and middle schools was implemented in 1996-97 with the high school accountability model developed during that year and implemented for the first time in the 1997-98 school year.

The ABCs Accountability Model for K-8 established growth standards for each elementary and middle school in the state. Schools that attained specified levels of growth were eligible for incentive awards or other recognition (including Schools of Excellence, Schools of Distinction, or Top 25 Schools in Academic Growth). The schools whose growth and performance fell below specified levels were designated as low-performing. Low-performing schools were those that failed to meet their expected growth standard and had less than 50% of their students performing at or above grade level. Outcomes were based on data collected during the school year and one previous year for reading and mathematics. To be eligible for incentive awards, schools also could not have excessive exemptions and must have tested at least 98% of their eligible students.

North Carolina was a pioneer in school accountability in the mid-1990s when the state's education and political leaders developed the ABCs of Public Education, the school accountability model in place during the North Carolina Turnaround work. At that time, few states were able to measure student academic growth from year to year and use this
information to evaluate school performance. Since the ABCs model was already in place when No Child Left Behind was adopted, North Carolina had to make some modifications to the system in order to adhere to the federal guidelines. The ABCs model included the growth component as well as a performance composite component but did not look at subgroups of the population that addresses the achievement gap identified in No Child Left Behind (www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability). The sanctions were also not in place in the ABCs model which focused more on a rewards system for meeting academic gains and performance instead of sanctions for not meeting. While considered to be progressive allowing schools to make improvements and be removed from them, the sanctions directly impacted the operations of the school as well as the personnel within it. If a school got into the restructuring phase of sanctions the entire faculty could be replaced beginning with the removal of the principal (Neuman-Sheldon, 2008).

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education offered each state educational agency (SEA) the opportunity to request flexibility on behalf of itself, its local educational agencies (LEAs), and its schools, in order to better focus on improving student learning and increasing the quality of instruction. This voluntary opportunity provided educators and state and local leaders with flexibility regarding specific requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction. This flexibility was intended to build on and support the significant state and local reform efforts already underway in critical areas such as transitioning to college and career-ready standards and assessments; developing systems of
differentiated recognition, accountability, and support; and evaluating and supporting teacher and principal effectiveness. On May 29, 2012, the U.S. Department of Education approved North Carolina’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility Request for waivers to thirteen provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). North Carolina is now uniquely positioned to support the implementation of the principles outlined in the ESEA Flexibility package as these principles are aligned to the goals identified in its approved Race to the Top (RtT) grant under Governor Beverly Perdue’s *College and Career Ready, Set, Go!* initiative. Allowing the state to utilize its limited federal resources more flexibly will help the state achieve its goal of great teachers and leaders, college and career-ready standards, and data systems to improve instruction.

School districts and charter schools receive support for implementing creative and meaningful programs and activities that will result in more students graduating from high school, being better prepared for college, and possessing the skills necessary for careers in today's economy. By establishing partnerships with districts and schools, North Carolina can continue to support the principles of the ESEA Flexibility by comprehensively planning and delivering support for teachers and leadership teams across the state as the state transitions to new standards for teaching and learning.

More recently, North Carolina was one of twelve states to be awarded a Race to the Top grant, providing almost four hundred million dollars to the state and districts of North Carolina focused around four pillars. The four areas include great teachers and principals; learning standards and assessments that align with 21st Century demands; technology systems to support strong schools; and turnaround support for the lowest-achieving schools.
These four areas focus on putting the right people in place, ensuring the proper school environments and learning standards, providing tools appropriate for today’s young learners, and taking responsibility for schools that have historically low performance. The learning standards section also outlines the opportunity the state will take to develop a new accountability model and system.

With new standards for all content areas being implemented in the 2012-13 school year, new assessments also will be implemented. The new accountability model for the state is under development with preliminary ideas including composite information as well as growth. An additional component looks at determining educator effectiveness by performance of students on standardized tests, adding an additional layer of accountability directly linked to classroom performance and teacher evaluation as well as administrators’ evaluation (www.ncpublicschools.org/educatoreffectiveness). With this new emphasis on evaluation of teachers and administrators, school systems across the state are utilizing research and experience to redesign their teacher and principal selection process (McIver et al., 2009).

The Principal Selection Process

The selection of leaders demands school districts to be aware of the individual needs of schools and try to align principals to address weak areas and reverse the trend of failure. Fennell (2005) suggested effective leaders emphasize shared leadership, conceptions of power as an enabling source of energy within the school, the emphasis on a common vision
and dialogue within each of the schools, and the need to educate future leaders and researchers of leadership in a variety of philosophical and theoretical perspectives. Four main themes emerged: schools as collaborative professional communities, valuing people and their unique contributions to the learning community, viewing knowledge/power as an expandable resource, and resisting practices and policies that could interfere with the goals of the learning community. Robinson (2006) further suggests a shift from the principal’s role focusing on management to now focusing more on the principal providing strong leadership in instruction and mastery. She cites the Taskforce of the American Educational Research Association in its report on a new agenda for research in educational leadership:

In the past, educational leaders were judged routinely on their effectiveness in managing fiscal, organizational, and political conditions in their schools and school systems. In essence, they were expected simply to set the stage for student learning. Now leaders are increasingly being held accountable for the actual performance of those under their charge . . . Given growing expectations that leaders can and should influence learning, it is important to understand how leadership, learning, and equity are linked. (p. 1)

The Institute of Educational Sciences discussed the need for change in leadership in these chronically low-performing schools. A change in leadership practices in the school is essential. Because the current school leader may be enmeshed in past strategies, a new leader can immediately signal change. They found, however, if there is not a change in leaders, the existing leader can signal change by radically altering leadership practices
Marzano (2004) determined, “Leadership is a necessary condition for effective reform relative to the school-level, the teacher-level, and the student-level factors” (p. 172). He further suggests there are three key principles of effective leadership and three necessary leadership traits in order to effectively change school practices leading to improved student achievement. The three key principles of effective leadership as stated by Marzano are: (1) “Leadership for change is most effective when carried out by a small group of educators with the principal functioning as a strong cohesive force”; (2) “The leadership team must operate in such a way as to provide strong guidance while demonstrating respect for those not on the team”; and (3) “Effective leadership for change is characterized by specific behaviors that enhance interpersonal relationships” (p. 186). The leadership traits Marzano (2004) identifies are optimism, honesty, and consideration. Optimism provides hope when difficult decisions and situations present themselves which often happen as people are resistant to necessary but difficult changes. Martin Seligman (1991) defined optimism as “the power of nonnegative thinking” (p. 167) and stresses the power of such optimism can result in less painful change. Honesty, as discussed by Marzano, reflects not only truthfulness but includes consistency in word and action with accuracy and in a timely manner. The final trait, consideration, is when
the leader shows a visual display of care and concern for teachers, students, staff, and the community. This consideration develops relationships and helps to enable people to accept and deal with change on a more personal level.

In the 1990s, Baron conducted a study looking at the importance superintendents placed on the selection of a principal. During that time the study revealed that superintendents perceived preparation of an accurate job description, development of specific recruitment procedures, and recruiting on a statewide basis as the important issues when selecting effective principals. More recently, Heifetz (1994) and Wagner’s (2006) research has a focus on adaptive challenge. They agree that the necessary knowledge to solve a problem does not exist. It requires people to create the knowledge and the tools to solve the problem as they are working on the solution. Heifetz (1994) suggests that “when individuals and organizations meet adaptive challenges they themselves become something different. It is not merely some new skill or capacity that has been “inputted” into the person or organization. The person or organization grows into a different form: it adapts” (p. 11). In response then these learning organizations require very different kinds of leaders; leaders who recognize that they too may have to change in order to lead the organizational changes (Senge, 1990).

While job descriptions and credentials begin to solidify potential candidates, the personal interview continues to be practiced the most in the principal selection process. Despite the limitations of the interview process not being able to show past or present performance, superintendents still depend on this face-to-face contact interview when selecting principals. Hertling (1999) suggests making the interview a screening tool to
observe if the interviewers possess characteristics such as alertness to cues, ability to make fine distinctions, and the ability to suppress biases. Because of the complexity of the job, many school systems are using interview teams with some form of interview training prior to the actual interview (Winter, McCabe, & Newton, 1998).

Castetter and Young (2000) suggest that, as competition increases for filling administrative vacancies, finding qualified, talented personnel to conduct the work of education systems requires a recruitment process that must be an extensive and aggressive program directed toward placing and keeping a qualified and satisfied individual. Research indicates that school principals heavily impact teacher working conditions and affect the recruitment and retention of talented teachers (DeAngelis, Peddle, & Trott, 2002; Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest, 2008). School leadership, after quality teaching, is the most significant school-related contributor to how much students learn (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). When hiring decisions are made, district level administrators must consider the future of their schools and public education. According to Lambert et al. (2002), perceptions of teaching and learning have changed during the past decade, and expectations of principals have changed as well. Contemporary school principals’ leadership responsibilities not only include the traditional task of efficiently managing students, staff, and grounds but also deep engagement in instructional community issues (Whitaker, 2002). Current school leaders are being asked to build professional communities of reflective practitioners who critically consider how schools can improve learning and achievement of all students (Lambert et al., 2002).
Researchers and practitioners have suggested that challenges to recruiting and selecting new school principals can be addressed by modifying the common practices of hiring committees. School district hiring committees commonly include educators and community members who understand local culture and processes but may have different beliefs about leadership. Suggested changes focus on building hiring committees’ capacity to make informed and shared decisions about a new school leader by adequately resourcing hiring committee work and providing a systematic process for collecting and weighing data about candidates (Spanneut, 2007). By acknowledging the differences in beliefs and perceptions of effective leaders, a diverse hiring committee can bring all perspectives in for consideration and by consensus identify the best leaders (Whaley, 2002).

In 2011, the Wallace Foundation began a grant funded principal pipeline initiative. This study is a multi-year effort to help six districts strengthen and align standards, training, hiring, and evaluation procedures for principals in an effort to improve the quality of teaching and increase student achievement (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, MacFarlane, 2013). The districts participating in this study are large, urban districts but the first year yielded results that could be transferred to any school district. The report states, “The hiring process is becoming more systematic.” (Turnbull, B. J., et al., 2013, p. 43). A focus was placed on including performance tasks and developing a thorough collection of data about each candidate while still incorporating the human component in matching leaders to schools (Turnbull, et al., 2013).
Principal Leadership and Teachers’ Perceptions

Based on research by Brookover (1979), Edmonds (1979), and Rutter, Maughn, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979) some of the correlates of effective schools include strong leadership, a climate of expectation, an orderly but not rigid atmosphere, and effective communication. These researchers along with Marzano (2003) suggest that the existence or nonexistence of a strong educational leader, the climate of the school, and posture of the teaching staff can directly influence all aspects of teaching and learning. The structure of personalities and how personalities affect the interactions of people date back to the psychodynamic approach of Sigmund Freud and other theoreticians (Rebore, 2003). Administrators must understand human behavior in order to facilitate relationships with people thus creating positive perceptions of their leadership and generating buy-in from teachers for reform (Freud, 1917).

Several studies reinforce the conclusion that transformational leadership has an impact on teachers’ perceptions of school conditions, their commitment to change, and the organizational learning that takes place. Teachers' perceptions of their principals' effectiveness are positively related to school climate, while principals' flexibility or variance in dealing with people is negatively correlated to school climate. If the teachers perceive that their principal varies his/her leadership style, teachers tend to rate the school climate lower (Bogler, 2001; Fullan, 2002).

Flexibility with regard to student discipline or duty assignments could negatively be related to school climate, i.e., teachers feel that other teachers are treated differently. Conversely, if the teachers feel that their principal treats teachers consistently, then the
teachers feel positive about leadership and school climate (Kelly, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2007). The old proverb that perception becomes reality must be considered when determining the effectiveness of a principal. An individual’s perception is their reality.

One consideration for explaining perceptions is illustrated through the Johari Window concept. This well-published concept illustrates graphically the relationships between one's known self and one's unknown self. The Johari Window is a model developed by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham to describe how humans interact, including the process of giving and receiving feedback (Luft, 1969). The model is used as a tool to foster self-awareness and understanding of people interaction (Figure II)

![Johari Window Diagram](Figure II Johari Window)

The green box, referred to as the blind quadrant—things that are known to others but unknown to self, depicts how principals might be unaware of how teachers perceive them as leaders. In schools, blind spots can occur in many areas: e.g., inconsistent discipline procedures, pet projects, or lack of communication skills are three of many examples. For
example, a principal perceived by teachers to be quick-tempered, boisterous, and scheming, but unaware of these traits, could result in teachers unwilling to provide meaningful feedback to the principal such that they could grow professionally. Their perception of the leadership, however, is determined by these behaviors and relates closely to the principals ability to impact change in school reform (Richardson, 1998).

With respect to outcomes, leadership has an influence on teachers’ perceptions of progress with implementing reform initiatives and teachers’ perceptions of increases in student outcomes. These observations again focus on two characteristics of transformational leadership: its distributed nature and its targeting of capacity development across a broader spectrum of the school community members. According to Jackson’s (2000) assessment, attempts to develop shared transformational leadership in a set of English schools, supports the distribution of leading as well as, helps to identify and build the capacity of others. What has emerged from Sharnbrook’s work, and that of others within the project, is a set of understandings about a more dispersed leadership model which is opportunistic, flexible, responsive and context-specific, rather than prescribed by roles, inflexible, hierarchical and status-driven practices (Hallinger, 2003, p. 340).

As Marzano (2003) points out, leadership is often thought to be the one most influential aspect of successful school reform that affects all aspects of teaching and learning. Based on research from Western Michigan University, the stakeholders’ perceptions about leadership directly impact the culture and processes within the school. Conversations with teachers can identify any connections between school leadership and school improvement if
the teachers have personally experienced an underperforming school that made significant school improvement after a change in leadership occurred (Gorton, et al., 2007).

**Summary**

In summary, the North Carolina Turnaround project produced such positive results it was replicated to expand its impact to more schools and districts under the Race to the Top grant awarded to the state in 2010. In addition, the state’s focus on leadership development through a new evaluation system based on standards aligned to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders raised the expectations for leaders and clearly defined an emphasis on improving student achievement. The new accountability system in the state is still being developed with new assessments based on the common core standards adopted in the majority of states. As a direct result of all of the changes, districts are now looking at their hiring practices and beginning to develop new criteria for the selection of school leaders based on the needs of the school as well as the focus on developing communities of reflective practitioners. The following chapter will establish the study that will take a deeper dive into the Turnaround initiative and begin to look closely at the principals of the three schools where student achievement gains were significant.
Chapter Three
Methodology

Through a qualitative multisite case study approach I will study leadership in three turnaround high schools in rural North Carolina. This study will look at how principals were selected by the superintendent or central office administration and compare the criteria to the new North Carolina School Executive Evaluation, how the leaders in the school view their role in turning the school around, and what the teachers perceive the principal’s role was in the school’s improvement.

Explanation of the Appropriateness of the Approach

The multisite case study approach which considers an issue but is illustrated through several cases as defined by Creswell (2007) will provide an opportunity to study historical patterns and trends of the school and the impact the history of low student achievement has had on it. It will also include a comprehensive look at the leadership, during the time the school turned around, to further understand the change in practices and culture of the school and the impact the principal had, if any, on these changes. Since the commonality amongst the three high schools is their chronic failure, causing them to be identified as the lowest-achieving high schools in the state, this approach defined by these boundaries can assist in making some connections between the cases. This approach further supports a holistic look at the school and practices within. Creswell (2007) suggests that through extensive data collection from a variety of sources a thorough description of the case can emerge.

According to Yin (2003) a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior
of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. He further suggests case study research allows the researcher to explore individuals or organizations, through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena (Yin, 2003).

**Specific Methodological Approach**

This study will be a qualitative multisite case study. This approach is valuable for educational research to evaluate programs and develop interventions because of its flexibility and rigor. This qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather through a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. There are two key approaches that guide case study methodology; one proposed by Robert Stake (1995) and the second by Robert Yin (2003, 2006). Both seek to ensure that the topic of interest is well explored, and that the essence of the phenomenon is revealed.

Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one’s perspective. This paradigm “recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn’t reject outright some notion of objectivity. Pluralism, not relativism, is stressed with focus on the circular dynamic tension of subject and object” (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 10). Constructivism is built upon the premise of a social
construction of reality (Searle, 1995). Another advantage of this approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants, while enabling participants to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these stories the participants are able to describe their views of reality and this enables the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). This type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent. The specificity of focus makes it an especially good design for practical issues (Merriam, 1998).

A multisite case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases are chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003). A multisite case study will allow the researcher to analyze within each setting and across settings. In a multisite case study, we are examining an event or occurrence at several locations. The choice between single-case and multiple-case designs for case study research is a function of the principle goal of the research, the availability of relevant cases, and the research budget.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will be explored in this study:

RQ1: What factors do principals believe attributed to the turnaround in student achievement for three high schools in rural North Carolina?
RQ2: What leadership factors do teachers believe cause schools to make significant improvement in student achievement?

RQ3: In what ways do the school executive standards align to the effective practices of leading school turnaround as identified in this study?

**Site Selection and Sample**

The unit of analysis is three high schools identified in 2006 as three of the lowest sixty-six high schools in the state utilizing stratified purposeful sampling. The selected high schools were required to participate in a partnership with the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction’s turnaround efforts because of their overall performance on state standardized testing was producing less than 50 percent of the students as proficient. Through interviews with the principals and central office administrators and a survey of teachers I have gleaned what they felt changed to result in such a high improvement in a historically low-performing school (see Appendices A and B). After the interview process with both leaders I transcribed the information to hopefully identify common themes or patterns for implications of future turnaround initiatives.

I focused this study on three high schools in three rural districts in North Carolina that were among the 66 lowest high schools in the state in 2006 and whose overall performance composite has risen from the 40’s to at least the 60’s. Each of these schools had a principal change and through the North Carolina Turnaround project improved their composites as measured by the North Carolina Accountability System. The three schools were selected based not only on their willingness to participate but also by their demographic data, size, and a change of the principal. The physical location of the schools is situated in the
Eastern or Coastal Plain Region of North Carolina, specifically in schools that were identified by the judicial system of North Carolina as the lowest in the state and in threat of being closed if student achievement in the schools did not drastically improve.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected through a variety of sources, including interviews and surveys as detailed below.

*Interviews*

Seidman (2006) describes interviewing as a process of gathering stories. The stories emerge and the process allows the interviewer to share in the experiences and add subjective reasoning. Initially, I set up face-to-face interviews or teleconferences with superintendents and/or Human Resource personnel responsible for selecting the principals placed in the three schools offering to send a letter to explain the research (see Appendices A and B). These interviews were held in the school system’s central office or by phone to determine how the principals were selected to lead these schools in major reform. Specifically, what characteristics did the system consider when selecting a principal to reverse the trend of low academic performance? I also included interviews with the principals to determine what they believe caused the improvement and how their efforts might be replicated in different settings with similar results (see Appendix C).

Seidman suggests several things to consider. He discusses how the interviewer should listen, suggesting three levels: listening to the spoken word for meaning, hearing the unguarded intent and terminology when describing the experiences, and watching for non-verbal cues (2006, p. 78). He also offers suggestions for interviewing that include being
responsive but not leading the response, do not interrupt, seek stories about an experience as concrete examples and be patient allowing for silences without agreement or disagreement.

Electronic Survey

A survey is a research method for collecting information from a selected group of people using standardized questionnaires or interviews (Porter, 2004). Richard Light, a nationally recognized proponent of conducting and using survey research, believes that good research is one of the most important bases for sound decision making. Light and colleagues (1990) have argued that, “If used wisely, it [survey research] can lead to improvements throughout the entire fabric of an institution” (p. 234). Utilizing an online anonymous survey, the survey asked teachers who were teaching during the improvement years to respond to several questions with a Likert Scale and some open-ended/constructed response questions to provide the opportunity to respond in their own words their perception of the school’s success in school turnaround. Specifically, the questions will ask about the turnaround experience but other questions related to principal practice and effectiveness will be included as well (see Appendix D).

The available literature on Web surveys points to widely varying response rates. This is to be expected as access to Internet technology expands and changes. Additionally, response rates are probably more dependent on the population sampled than on any other factor (Handwerk, Carson, & Blackwell, 2000; Matz, 1999; Tomsic, Hendel, & Matross, 2000; Underwood, Kim, & Matier, 2000). Based on survey response rate research conducted by Hamilton (2009) response rates vary greatly, but most surveys receive a 26% response or
better depending on the number of participants. The goal of this study is to exceed and obtain a 30% response rate or better from each site.

Document Review

A final process in data collection will be the study of the new North Carolina Standards for School Executives (NCSSE). Under the Race to the Top grant, North Carolina has continued to revise and improve its evaluation instrument, adding an additional standard directly connected to the school’s performance on state tests. This standard, not in place at the time of the turnaround efforts in this study, has added an additional dimension to the expectations for principals to improve student achievement as measured through state testing. During the turnaround efforts in this study the NCSSE were amended so comparing the information collected through interviews and the survey will allow me to identify any alignment or misalignment between standards and practice. In addition, a review of the 2008 and 2010 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey results will provide additional data about the principal practices during the turnaround initiative.

Data Analysis

In determining how to analyze the data, I will depend on certain propositions which Yin (2003) suggests will help shape the data collection plan. Since so much of leadership is dependent upon relationships, the analysis would have to include the relationships between teachers and principals as well as the relationships between the principals and other people in the schools and school systems. Yin (2003) further suggests, “theoretical propositions about causal relations--answers to “how” and “why” questions--can be extremely useful in guiding case study analysis in this manner” (p. 112).
Descriptive statistics are used to describe the basic features of the data in a study. They provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. With descriptive statistics you are simply describing what is or what the data shows. Descriptive means that the end product of a case study is a rich description of the phenomenon under study. This thick description is a term from anthropology and means the complete literal description of the incident or entity being investigated (Merriam, 1998). This rich descriptive data will require a system of classification or coding scheme so the patterns in the data are labeled (Patton, 2002). Given (2008) suggests in vivo coding is the practice of assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken from that section of the data, words which were used by interviewees. The aim of creating in vivo codes is to ensure that concepts stay as close as possible to research participants’ own words or use their own terms because they capture a key element of what is being described.

Since I will be using a multiple case study approach I will attempt to begin to explain what specific characteristics of the leader or perceptions of the leader could be identified as factors in the transformation of these schools. Yin (2003) defines this explanation as finding a set of “causal links” (p. 120) that help define patterns matched and identified across constituents. Another analysis looked at how the district chose the principal and what criteria they used for hiring. I cross referenced that information with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives to determine if they align. While these interviews were being held, teachers who taught during the time period the principal was there were asked to participate in a survey to identify key factors responsible for the school turnaround as well as their beliefs about their leader and the relationship, if any, to turnaround. While this may not have
led to generalizations about leadership in all schools and its impact on the success of schools, it could further suggest ideas for future research about the lowest-achieving schools and provide research for common practices found in various settings.

**Research Validity and Reliability**

Qualitative research methods primarily include observations and interviews where the researcher charts behavior or makes field notes. Field notes are purely subjective because they are a researcher's opinion about someone or something, gathered while watching and listening. Accordingly, qualitative research has a more difficult task when trying to establish the reliability and validity of its data (Kirk & Miller, 1986).

In looking at validity and reliability Yin (2003) suggests several tests and tactics to consider at various phases of the research. Within the research design considering external validity or the generalizability of the study beyond the three schools can help in establishing validity to the study. Since this study involved multiple site I included common practices found in the schools to hopefully further develop practices for leaders. By utilizing multiple sources of evidence during the data collection phase and noting triangulation of information through these various sources, construct validity was established. In the analysis phase of the study depending on pattern matching and building explanations for practices identified helped in building internal validity as well.

**Subjectivity Statement**

As a former principal and district leader as well as the District Transformation Coach Team Lead and currently serving as the Assistant Director for District and School Transformation, my experience working with historically failing schools has been through
many lenses. As a principal, I experienced the success of moving a school from proficiency with over sixty percent of our students tested to over ninety percent of our students tested being proficient. This led me to starting another magnet program at the direction of the superintendent to change a historically failing school into a school of choice. I have experience in building a new program in an existing school that raises expectations for student achievement, parent involvement, and instructional practices. My experience taught me the importance of ensuring teachers, parents, students and the community understand and are aware of the importance of raising expectations for students and allowing only the best for their performance.

As a problem solver in my current role and always attempting to see the good and figure out how to solve an issue, I approached this study from a social constructivist point of view. Creswell (2007) looks at the issues from a broad and general perspective, “so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (p. 21). This discussion, rich in data, with central office personnel leaders, principals, and teachers triangulated the areas of need for the school and identified how to take the meaning they construct and turn it into something that supported the school in student achievement.

I have identified personal bias in regard to both leadership practices as well as the determination of a school’s success based on student achievement. Further, as an advocate for students and a belief that leadership success is dependent upon the relationships leaders have with people they lead, my bias provided a focused lens on the attributes of a successful
leader. Patton (2002) suggests, “what would be ‘bias’ in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore a strength” (p. 230).

By transcribing my own data, I was very aware of responses from people interviewed and made notes of body language and other nonverbal communication without assuming any meaning. Since my role with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is to support the schools and not evaluate their effectiveness, there were no ethical issues about information received from the interviews and survey. I did, however, share that my role as a researcher does not define my role as the Assistant Director for District and School Transformation and all of my research would be made available to the school and all participants if they requested it. By closely following the IRB guidelines I was also prepared to minimize any ethical issues that arose. Consistent communication with all participants also helped me in ensuring I did not cross any ethical lines.

The questions for research focused on factors principals believe contributed to the turnaround and compared them to teachers’ perceptions while trying to connect the leadership practices hiring criteria to school success and the North Carolina School Executive Standards. As a constructivist researcher, my hope was to listen to school and district leaders and identify teachers’ perceptions about principals’ leadership practices while discussing directly with them their attitudes and beliefs about leadership in the school and how it connects to student achievement. As a previous principal, I entered the study with my own beliefs about leadership. While some of the principals in the study will have different leadership styles and practices of their own, my personal experience and beliefs were an asset in helping establish relationships quickly with the people interviewed and may have
influenced the findings because of my belief that relationships are the key to change and play an integral part in school improvement.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of the study included time and the number of schools considered in the case study. Because of the vast research on leadership practices in schools a second limitation may have been the amount of research conducted that exhausts a variety of leadership practices. While I considered many aspects of leadership that have been effective in schools and compared those with the leadership practices in these schools some practice may have been omitted due to time and research. The sample may also be a limitation studying only three high schools in North Carolina. The results may not be generalizable due to this constraint. Finally, while I initially thought teacher and administrator turnover may present a limitation, the response rate to the survey and availability of the interviewees was much easier than anticipated.

**Summary**

Chapter Three has detailed the case study of three high schools in North Carolina that were recognized as successful Turnaround schools, improving student achievement above 60% proficient. In this study, data was collected through interviews with key district office personnel and principals coupled with an anonymous e-survey of teachers to determine what changes were made to improve student learning in a historically low-achieving school and what specific skills did the leadership have, if any, that played a role in school improvement. Further consideration was also given to how these skills align with the current standards used to evaluate school executives. Data collection and analysis were discussed and considerations
for the study providing a catalyst to future research were introduced. In chapter 4, the results of this study will be presented through an analysis of the data collected.
Chapter Four

Introduction

As stated in Chapter One the purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors do principals believe attributed to the turnaround in student achievement for three high schools in rural North Carolina?
RQ2: What leadership factors do teachers believe cause schools to make significant improvement in student achievement?
RQ3: In what ways do the school executive standards align to the effective practices of leading school turnaround as identified in this study?

This chapter will report the findings of the research through anecdotal methods and numerical data and presents the characteristics of the schools and school systems as well as the people interviewed who were a part of the turnaround experience as principals or central office representatives. In addition, the results of the responses from teachers who worked at the schools are compiled into numerical results and descriptive statistics to explain the findings. Finally, the findings are compared to the current school executive standards to show if an alignment of the system used for evaluating school principals and the characteristics identified in leaders successful with school turnaround exists.

The turnaround model in 2006 served as the springboard for the work the state continues to engage in to support the lowest-achieving schools in the state. The model, as shown in Figure III, represents the three-pronged approach to assisting schools in the turnaround endeavors. This study focuses on the best practices of effective schools digging
deeper into the leadership practices and the impact a turnaround leader has on turning a school around. The process for gleaning the information through interviews with principals of turnaround schools and discussions with central office administration will help in identifying those traits a leader possesses that effectively helps a school transform from a historically underachieving institution into a school that focuses on improving student achievement.

Figure III: Turnaround Model Graphic
(http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schooltransformation/turnaround/)

In the following sections of Chapter Four, the explanation, understanding, and interpretation of the qualitative data collected were utilized to capture the discussions with principals and district level staff and tells the story through their thoughts and responses of what caused the significant improvement in the schools. In addition, I identify patterns or trends that emerged from these discussions. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize surveys taken by teachers who worked under the principals who led the turnaround efforts
and identify their thoughts of the turnaround experience and how the principals contributed to the efforts. Also included are summary data taken from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey in 2008 and 2010 for the three sites in the study. Finally, I completed an analysis of the current North Carolina Standards for School Executives and the concepts gathered through the interviews and survey responses to see if the current standards identify those practices the principals, central office staff, and teachers believe resulted in improved student achievement through turnaround.

**Characteristics of Schools and School Systems in the Study**

The three school districts selected for this study are located in North Carolina and are classified as rural counties and served by the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center, Incorporated because of an average population density of 200 per square mile or less (http://www.ncruralcenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=75&Itemid=126). High schools that fell below a 60 percent performance composite as measured by the state assessment for two consecutive years, either 2004-05 and 2005-06 or 2005-06 and 2006-07, were identified as high priority high schools and participated in the NC Turnaround support. The Turnaround Plan included five components: initial assessment, professional development for leadership and instructional improvement, targeted strategic planning through the Framework for Action, leadership coaching, and selection/implementation of a reform or redesign model for high schools. For the purpose of this study the three schools will remain anonymous in name and will be defined as High School 1, High School 2, and High School 3 with corresponding District names of District 1, 2, and 3.
District 1, situated in the Northeast section of North Carolina, had a student population of about 3,100 and had six schools serving students in kindergarten through 12th grade. High School 1 had a population of approximately 1,000 students in grades nine through twelve. With a performance composite of 35.4% the school was designated as a High Priority School because they had less than 50% of their students performing at grade level but made expected growth for their students in that year. By definition in General Statute 115C-105.37, “Low-performing schools are those in which there is a failure to meet the minimum growth standards, as defined by the State Board, and a majority of students are performing below grade level.”

District 2, situated in the central eastern section of North Carolina, had a student population of about 750 and had six schools serving students in Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. High School 2 had a population of approximately 375 students in grades nine through twelve. With a performance composite of 57.8% the school was designated as a High Priority School because they had 50% to 60% of their students performing at grade level and made high growth for their students in that year. Though higher performing than the other schools in the study, the school qualified for turnaround services because of the required benchmark of 60% had not been met and the school had previously been in the lowest-performing high schools in the state.

District 3, situated in the southeastern section of North Carolina, had a student population of about 3,000 and had seventeen schools serving students in Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade. High School 3 had a population of approximately 800 students in grades nine through twelve. With a performance composite of 49.3% the school was designated as a High Priority School...
School because they had less than 50% of their students performing at grade level but made expected growth for their students in that year.

Table I below shows the progress of all three schools during the 4 years they participated in NC Turnaround. The services provided based on the model described above included coaching provided through retired principals considered to have been successful in schools during their tenure as well as targeted professional development. A Framework for Action was also required to target those areas that would have the greatest impact on student achievement.

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* Confidence Interval Applied

The Principals’ and District Staff Findings about Turnaround

District Staff

The district staff in this study included both superintendents and/or human resource personnel who were primarily responsible for hiring the turnaround principals in the three high schools in the study. Each person was interviewed via face to face or telephone
interviews based on their availability and choice. Each interview started with the questions from Appendix B along with questions or discussions that emerged from the conversation. This section identifies patterns and trends discovered in the interviews to begin to determine what district level staff believe are the key factors in turning a school around.

Factors Contributing to Turnaround

The first and strongest factor identified by all district staff interviewed is the importance of a strong leader. While the strength of the leader was identified by all, the definition of a strong leader differed from one with a great deal of experience to one with a passion and clear strategic focus on improving the school. Experience as defined by one human resource director, “…includes not only the number of years a person has led a school but particularly the experience a principal has had in a low-performing school. The experience and where the experience came from matters as much as the person.” A superintendent that identified experience as a necessary factor added this to the definition of experience, “…a turnaround principal has to have a thick skin. It’s not personal with the staff so much as it is personal with the kids. If the principal is not experienced in identifying the staff that need to go and building the staff to be focused on students then their experience is not relevant. A turnaround principal doesn’t come to make friends they come to make change.”

The experience concept was also defined as experience with all areas of the school. One director of personnel believes the experience of the principal includes their work with the families and communities as well as the culture of a school. “If the principal is experienced in raising the expectations of not only the educators but the community and
parents of a low-performing school then the number of years doesn’t really matter. The experience has to be relevant to the need or experience is a non-factor”. He continued by stressing the importance of learning this before a principal is hired, “Sometimes the questions we ask in a reference check when hiring a turnaround principal don’t get the information we need. We have to do other forms of soft checking through different media, conversations, and other forms of data to determine if the experience is relevant to our needs and will translate into improving our school.”

The clear focus of a turnaround principal was discussed by all central office staff interviewed. Having participated in NC Turnaround they identified the Framework for Action as the tool that helped identify the focus but clearly shared the principals came in with a focus for improvement. One superintendent shared, “The principal in a turnaround school has to be able to weed out the fluff. They have to identify the key areas for change and focus on those areas. If it isn’t essential, then forget about it. If it doesn’t center on students it isn’t important. A turnaround principal knows these things and can identify them fairly quickly”. The focus on improving student achievement also became evident when the director of personnel and superintendents all agreed that the leader must have an operationalized understanding of data and be able to determine the key points of intervention that will result in the strongest impact for student achievement. One superintendent stated, “It all comes down to what happens in the classroom. Let’s face it; we don’t all interact with those students everyday like a teacher does. The principal must be able to quickly assess what teachers are effectively teaching students the curriculum and what teachers are going through
the motions.” A focus on anything besides those factors that directly impact students was a waste of time and resources, a summarization of all of the central office staff discussions.

The second factor identified by the central office staff is the need for a clear understanding of the staff on the urgency of the need for change. One superintendent stated, “Sometimes a school staff doesn’t know what they don’t know. If they are routinely low-performing and begin to accept a state of low-achieving they believe they are doing the best they can do. They may believe they are working as hard as they can and still getting these results so therefore this is their destiny.” The issue of change was discussed with all of the central office staff interviewed in the study. One superintendent shared, “Change is perceived as bad. In order for a school to turnaround, just a loose definition of turnaround automatically takes people to a state of fear. Fear they will have to change and fear they may have to work harder.” A personnel manager added, “The issue of change is best described in the over-used phrase, “work smarter not harder”. While I am a believer in this phrase I see it truly coming to life in a turnaround school. If our educators in these schools don’t learn how to work smarter then change that is sustainable will not occur.”

A third factor identified is the need for a clear understanding of data. Data in the discussions was not considered to be just test data but rather a collection of all of the information about the school, including but not limited to test data, teacher turnover data, community challenges data, historical data about the school and community, financial resources information and any form of data the school could consider to determine causes for their performance. One superintendent shared, “If there was information about the high school out there we made sure the principal had it, good or bad. They had to understand the
history and current state of the school in order to figure out how to develop a plan for improvement.” The director of personnel explained data as all inclusive; everything that might impact the school would be considered in the data collection for the school. He shared, “We often get caught up in test scores as the only data available but our schools have so much more data to consider that we have to make sure we are seeing all of the school’s issues not just the tests. While the numbers don’t lie and we know that the numbers publically name our schools successful or not, there is much more information that helps us determine how to address the needs than just test scores”.

**Effective Leader**

As the interviews continued, the focus shifted from a discussion about general turnaround to a focus on the leader. All central office staff interviewed, whether superintendent or central office personnel, recognized the importance of an effective leader. Without the leadership of the principal the schools’ success would not have occurred. This then led to the discussion about the selection of such a leader. The general characteristics of a turnaround leader, while similar to those identified in leadership studies discussed in Chapter 2, were more specific at these sites but similar to each other.

The summary of characteristics identified through the interviews included selecting a principal who is comfortable with change, understands student achievement, knows effective teaching and if students are learning, and isn’t concerned about longevity in the position. The concept of change was consistent in all of the interviews; change was inevitable and had to focus on students and be clearly understood by all. Understanding student achievement ranged from understanding and analyzing data to recognizing the need to meet each child
individually and how to lead teachers through an understanding of how students learn. A director of personnel summed it up by saying, “If the candidates interviewing for a principal’s job in a low-performing school don’t understand student achievement why are they interviewing in the first place? We can begin our interview process with that question and if the candidate stumbles when explaining student achievement we may not have the candidate we need.” This way of thinking also came through in discussions around understanding good teaching and student learning. One superintendent, passionate about a principal understanding good teaching said, “I truly believe a good principal has to have been a good teacher. In a turnaround school this couldn’t be truer. It’s not enough mind you, but if a candidate wasn’t a good teacher how in the world can they build good teachers in the schools? It seems to me the two have to go together.”

The concept of short longevity intrigued me as an interviewer so some questions emerged in the discussion to better understand this idea. All of the central office staff interviewed shared an overall theme of turnaround work as time limited. The person selected as a turnaround principal is one who enjoys that type of work on a regular basis. They concentrate intensely on making change happen. These types of leaders focus on improvement and then shift to the improvement’s sustainability. One superintendent added this, “…sustaining is not maintaining. By sustain I mean the school’s ability to continue to improve”. Once the turnaround principal is confident in the sustainability, they move to the next step in their career. “Many turnaround leaders are just that, they go into a situation, turn it around and then move on to the next school to turn around,” a personnel manager shared. The director of personnel added to this way of thinking, “Sometimes a turnaround principal
builds a reputation fairly quick and is beginning their climb up the career ladder. Unfortunately, much like good teachers we lose these leaders to central office positions and I believe their impact on schools is lessened the further they get away from the school building itself.” A superintendent shared, “If you talk with the staff under these principals, you may discover they were not the most liked. I have found they are respected but usually don’t come in to be liked by all but rather driven to improve the school and not afraid to make difficult decisions if they are in the best interest of the children”. The longevity issue was also discussed in terms of the energy and commitment level a turnaround principal must have. “A turnaround principal is like an Energizer bunny on steroids. They can burn out quick in a turnaround situation as things begin to improve. They have to move on to be challenged in other areas or feel they are being challenged in new ways,” a human resource director explained.

**North Carolina Standards for School Executives**

In the discussion around the North Carolina Standards for School Executives all of the central office staff felt these standards globally identified the areas in which a principal must have expertise but felt a turnaround principal had to have more. “The standards are just that standards, but it takes more than the standards to turn around a school with a history of failure. The standards are a starting point but we have to dig deeper in the standards when we talk about finding the right principal for a turnaround school,” one superintendent shared. The Director of Personnel agreed by saying, “if you’re asking if the standards were considered, by all means, but a turnaround principal has to have more. We are looking for a certain kind of leader, one who goes beyond the standards. We try and focus on the areas of
concern for the school more than the standards when we hire.” The standards were discussed more in the evaluation of a principal and less when selecting a principal. Since all of the districts utilize a team or panel of interviewers, the questions are specific to the schools and were at the time of turnaround based on identifying the specific needs of each school and identifying the principal that could address those weaknesses. While all central office staff felt they could match the selection process with an area in the standards and they were almost automatically a part of the interview questions, no one shared that the standards were a deciding factor in the selection of the principal.

**Turnaround Principals**

The interviews with principals were held face to face at a meeting place convenient to them. They were all conducted within a ninety minute timeframe which allowed for time to allow the interview questions to emerge from the discussion. While the questions from the Appendix C were used to initially guide the discussion, the interview went in the direction logical to the discussion and specific to the experiences of each principal. After transcribing all of the interviews and comparing each principal’s discussion several common themes emerged. As concluded in the study by Thompson, et al. (2011) the three principals in this study were quiet leaders, going beyond developing rapport with teachers and students, utilizing their knowledge of quality instruction, and having an unrelenting focus on students and improving student outcomes. They all recognized their work ethic as strong and their personal connection to every teacher, student, and family in the school. They considered their visibility throughout the school, daily classroom visits, as well as participation in the professional learning communities at each school a vital part of their knowledge of the
school. All three recognized the need to make difficult decisions and hold every teacher accountable for their students, accepting no excuses for failure. Each principal felt a clear set of expectations was necessary for improvement and a consistent message to all made these expectations understood.

Strategies

All three principals shared a common need for clear expectations for all. Included in this discussion were expectations for themselves, teachers, students, family, and community. One principal shared, “I knew from the start if I didn’t raise the level of expectations for the staff and the students we were destined to fail. At our first faculty meeting I told them we were going to be a School of Distinction (defined as 80%-89% of students are performing on grade level). They looked at me and knew I was serious.” Another principal shared they developed their expectations after a short time on the job. He stated, “After meeting with each staff member individually I knew there was no common understanding of expectations prior to my arrival. Teachers went in their classrooms, taught their students and let the tests happen, taking no responsibility for the outcomes. This was a problem and I had to establish early on our scores were ours and we were responsible for making them improve”. The third principal shared that establishing expectations was a little more than just talking the expectations. The staff seemed to know the right language but actions and words were not in accord. He shared, “I was really surprised when I first arrived to talk to teachers. They clearly knew all of the right things to say but as I spent days and evenings in the schools, more specifically, in classrooms I realized it was only jargon because what they said and what they did were not aligned.” All three principals realized they had a task to conquer
raising and/or establishing expectations for the staff which would require them to be very specific about their own expectations not only for teachers but for students.

While the expectations were predominantly about student achievement and teachers raising their expectations, two of the three principals interviewed reported they had to also set expectations for student and teacher behavior. Students had to learn to be in class on time and ready to learn and teachers had to learn to hold students to these expectations as well as treat the students and each other with respect and support. Eliminating clichés of teachers and unhealthy competition producing winners and losers helped build the rapport of teachers and change the culture of expectations for behavior for all. One principal reported, “It was a different atmosphere when I left. They truly believed in themselves, both students and teachers. They expected to be successful and wouldn’t settle for less.”

**Communication**

A second strategy identified was the importance of constant communication. Communication with students, teachers, families, and the community was paramount in ensuring everyone knew the common message of improving student achievement. One principal took the opportunity to connect with the local faith-based community by developing relationships with the pastors. He reported, “If I needed something shared with the community and wanted to make sure the students and parents heard the same message, it came from the pulpit. By establishing these relationships I was invited to share at the Sunday services which eventually enabled me to share information with the pastors and they would share it from the pulpit in my place. I attended church services at every church represented in my school to have face to face communication with those families”. Another principal shared
the importance of both verbal and written communication. “I knew I couldn’t personally speak to every family but I tried to make sure everything I felt important enough to share verbally to a large population I followed up in writing or using the phone system and reached out to every household with a phone call. Communication is so vital I felt like I needed every opportunity to communicate the message we were moving forward and improving education for all of our students,” he shared passionately. All of the principals felt the communication was one way of connecting with people and establishing a common language understood by all, “…it’s not educator jargon we need to speak, if we all understand the issues we can better address them to improve,” one principal felt.

Strategic Focus

“When you first get to a school with a history of low performance, you can quickly get overwhelmed with things that need to change. As the leader I had to make sure we were focusing our improvement on two or three things that would improve student achievement quickly,” one principal shared about his first few weeks as the principal. All three, identified strategically focusing on those areas that were going to directly improve student achievement quickly gave them a target and helped to remove some of the obstacles that the clutter of working on too many things at one time creates. While each of the principals had specific areas to work on based on the needs of each school, all of them identified a focus on improving instruction, including better alignment with the curriculum, utilizing data to determine what teachers should continue at the school and who should not, and providing specific targeted professional development to improve instructional practices had to be priority.
Instruction as a whole was weak when each principal arrived. They reported teachers were teaching what they liked to teach and were generally teaching to the middle, which provided no opportunity for students needing remediation and no challenge for higher achieving students. “Helping teachers see the school had to be about the students not about the adults was one of the hardest lessons they had to learn,” one principal reported. He went on to say, “I had to remind them while they wanted the credit for students achieving they had to take responsibility for students who were failing. We were not going to blame the students, we were going to change our practice and meet the needs of all students.” Another principal shared how he had designed a staff meeting to simulate how students felt when they were excluded from the lesson. He included only one group of teachers receiving the information shared while the others had distractions such as interruptions, side conversations, communication in an unknown language and removal from the group being called out of the meeting. “I wanted them to experience first-hand what it felt like to be in a room, held accountable for what was being discussed and then prevented from learning for various reasons beyond their control. I’ll say this, it had an impact!” shared one principal.

**Clearly Articulated Plan**

A final common theme between the principals in this study was a clearly articulated plan for improvement. These three principals identified specifically the development of the Framework for Action, mentioning both the plan itself as well as the process used to develop it. “The participation of the leadership team, representing the whole staff, gave the plan authenticity. The leadership team owned the plan and therefore helped in getting buy-in from the rest of the staff,” one principal commented. While the components of the plan were
similar the content was specific to the needs of the school. Another principal shared,
“Developing the plan gave us an opportunity to look objectively at the history of the school’s
performance and through a process of open dialogue identify the areas we had to improve in
order to improve student achievement. Our team had representation across staff, students,
and parents so everyone could take ownership and feel a part of the final plan”.

While all three principals agreed the plan help to provide a laser focus for the main
things it also afforded an opportunity for all to be heard and helped them as leaders better
understand some of the deep rooted practices that had to change. One principal shared the
experience that listening to team members’ thoughts helped him to understand the culture of
the school and begin to identify why some practices, while ineffective, continued to be used.
He stated, “At first I wondered why some of the instruction was only lecture and note taking
with very little student engagement. After participating in the development of the plan I
realized the teachers didn’t know another way to teach. It was a matter of identifying that
need and providing the needed professional development and the process allowed us to do
just that”.

Two principals shared their previous experience with developing a school
improvement plan. “This plan was different. The Framework for Action, while required, gave
us a structure to develop a living document. It became the focus for our leadership team
meetings and allowed us the autonomy to stop things not working when we discovered they
weren’t working and shift gears as needed based on the data we had at the time”. Another
principal also commented, “It was really a learning experience for me too. When a collective
group of people can come together and begin to analyze data and make decisions based on
students, you bond as a staff. The Framework for Action provided us a way to hold each other accountable and begin to engage in meaningful discourse, challenging but very rewarding.” The school improvement process in all three schools was replaced with the Framework for Action and by the title alone helped to establish a sense of urgency and active participation. It was an ongoing process and became an integral part of the Turnaround work.

Aspiring Leader Advice

When asked about advice these principals would give aspiring leaders in Turnaround Schools much of the message was the same. One principal suggested lightheartedly, “be single, have no life, and basically marry the school and all of its issues.” He added, “you have to love it like it’s your own and devote 110% of your time to making sure it gets better. It must be your life.” At the same time on a more serious note, that principal shared, “I say that tongue in cheek but truly believe an aspiring leader has to know what they are undertaking. This is a job for a dedicated person who has a passion for students and an ability to make hard decisions in the face of adversity.” Another principal added, “You don’t enter into this profession seeking to make friends. While building relationships is important you have to make your decisions based on the students and if an ineffective teacher is preventing students from achieving, they have to go. Making those kinds of decision are never easy but an aspiring turnaround leader has to make them, maybe more often than a principal in a thriving school.”

A second theme of advice was built around data; specifically, the importance of understanding data and knowing how to analyze it in a way that leads to a change in teacher practice. One principal’s thoughts were captured in this statement, “I would lay awake at
night thinking about how to present the benchmark results in such a way that teachers would have that aha moment and think about how to change their teaching of the concept or concepts not mastered”. This also led to a discussion of teacher ownership with this principal and understanding that all are data. “It goes beyond the numbers for me. An aspiring leader is going to have to know how to personalize all of the data and lead the teachers in understanding how to own it, reflect on their practice and change to better meet the needs of students. Even as I say it I am reminded what a difficult task this can be, difficult but necessary,” one principal reflected on his past experience.

The third theme that emerged in this discussion was the issue of visibility. “You have to be present. I mean physically present in the community, at all school functions, visible and available throughout the day and constantly in and out of classrooms. Students, teachers, parents, and community members have to know you are an integral part of the culture of the school and your presence speaks louder than words,” one principal shared. Another principal captured the issue with visibility, “If I’m not visible in the school, at school functions and involved in community events, the people won’t take me serious. It’s lip service if I’m not living what I’m saying. I went on home visits, participated in community functions, attended funerals, and made it to classrooms on a daily basis. I was tired but I was visible and invested and the people knew it.” All three principals also shared the importance of knowing what was going on in every classroom, whether talking to students in the cafeteria or engaging in a lesson with the teacher, the principals had to be able to talk authentically about what they knew was happening with instruction. “Sometimes I would offer to teach a class. As a math teacher I wanted my math department to know I knew what quality math instruction should
look like and modeled it for them. They became the observer and then we could discuss the
lesson where they provided me feedback. Teachers seemed to appreciate the opportunity and
could better understand my expectations for their teaching,” one principal elaborated on his
experience.

Quick Strategy

A quick strategy identified by one principal was, “…give them something. What I
mean is go into the school and find something they need. It might be a new laminator or a
copier. It could be something as simple as additional copies on the existing copier, but be
careful with that one. You need a quick win sometimes.” Another principal identified the
need to communicate expectations early and clearly. He explained, “Don’t go in with both
barrels loaded but make sure they understand you are there to work with them to improve. I
found honoring the work they have already done with concrete evidence helped them know I
had done my homework and sharing my expectations for improvement helped to begin to
build the trust.”

All three principals identified relationships as important but the relationships had to
be built on a platform of mutual respect and high expectations. “To build a relationship with
staff around non-essentials gets you further away from the truth. I built my relationships
based on a common message and a belief in achieving a goal. No matter who I talked to my
message was the same and people began to believe and trust what I was saying. That built
professional relationships with a common language and understanding,” one principal shared.

A final quick strategy, though somewhat time consuming, was to meet with every
employee individually. All of the principals shared this strategy and felt it allowed staff an
opportunity to talk with the new leader and share their story of the school. One principal stated, “It was an eye opening experience. Some people won’t speak up in a group so it allowed those people to have a voice and it helped me understand some of the reasons behind low expectations and lack of parent involvement. I used these discussions to begin to identify areas I needed to fill a void. Giving people an opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions helps you to understand their actions.”

**Learning from Failures**

“Failures, well I’ve had my share of those, so where should I begin,” one principal joked. All three principals interviewed believed their failures were as important as their successes. One principal further explained, “It’s what you learn from the failure and how you change so as not to repeat the same mistake.” When sharing specifically, one principal felt his biggest failure was not saving all of the teachers. “I had to replace over 50% of my staff after the first year and I took it personally. Was I so bad as a leader that so many people were leaving the profession, retiring or simply seeking a job somewhere else? That was a tough internal battle that I had to realize may not be completely my fault. I wanted to support every teacher and move them into a place where their teaching resulted in student achievement and when they weren’t willing to change I failed. In retrospect, I learned that people have to be open to trying new things and change and an unwillingness to do that would not last in the school I was leading.”

Another failure shared by another principal was trying to be everything to everybody. “As a leader you have to understand part of the job includes building other leaders. When I first became the principal in this low-performing school I felt I had to be the answer to every
problem. If I couldn’t fix it then we were doomed. I learned quickly that I was not the savior, but rather I needed to build the capacity of others to lead. My role then became more focused around identifying key people on staff who were already leaders and building their capacity to support the change in expectations for students and staff. By surrounding yourself with leaders you become a better leader, the true meaning of being a leader of leaders.” Another principal shared this same way of thinking, “I learned very early I couldn’t do it all and when I tried to, I failed. When I could trust others to lead initiatives it built their confidence and trust in themselves as well as in me. I failed when I tried to work in isolation. Though I came in with a clear purpose of turnaround, I couldn’t do it alone. The quicker I built leaders around me and relied on their expertise the quicker I could focus on the next thing to improve.”

The final failure shared by one principal was, “We didn’t reach 100% before I left,” though joking somewhat it was evident he meant what he was saying. He continued, “Anything less than 100% of students being successful is not good enough. Did we improve, sure, was the school in a better place when I left, definitely, but we didn’t reach 100% so I failed some of those students.” It was clear in all three interviews the students were the center of these principals’ work. They felt a sincere dedication to making students successful, all students and anything less than all was not success. Though one principal captured the failure with 100%, all three shared their focus on students and it was clear that even one student not achieving was not good enough. Another principal shared the starfish story as one that constantly reminds him of the importance of every child, “…it matters to this one, as the boy throws the starfish back in the water, and every student was a starfish that mattered.”
Teachers Perceptions of Turnaround Leaders

After obtaining permission from the superintendent and principal in each school an anonymous online survey was sent to the staff’s email address. From a total of about 100 teachers still working at the school and who previously worked with the principal in NC Turnaround, the survey yielded a 45% response rate, overall. High School 1 had a 57% response rate, High School 2 had a 47% response rate, and High School 3 had a 38% response rate. The overall response rate was higher than expected. The questions for the survey were in multiple choice and constructed response.

Multiple Choice Response Analysis

Data from the multiple choice responses are represented in Table II below.

Table II: Summary of Multiple Choice Responses on Teacher Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Survey Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The vision of the school is the key for school change in my school</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school staff embraces the vision of the principal for school success</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school principal understand and recognizes good teaching procedures</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal understand how students learn</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment is perceived as a vital part of the instructional process</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am involved in my evaluation on an ongoing basis</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our principal's leadership in faculty meetings challenges and stimulates our professional growth</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summarizing the multiple choice items from the survey, 98%, the largest percent in the survey, strongly agree the communication in the school between principal and staff were well developed and maintained with 2% responding agree totaling the 100% response. The second largest response of strongly agree, 94%, deals with the knowledge of the principals.
about the accountability system and this item had the remaining 6% of responders in agreement. With 91% of the responders choosing strongly agreed to questions about scheduling, school culture and the knowledge of good instructional practice by the principal, another area is identified where a large majority of teachers from all three settings agreed. These same three areas received agree from the remaining responders to that again 100% of the responders supported all three areas to different degrees.

Not far behind the over 90% strongly agree results are issues that 80% to 89% of the responders felt deserved a strongly agree response and 6% to 11% responded with agree. Those areas include: expectations of the principal around communication with parents with 100% of the responders selecting strongly agree or agree, 89% and 11% respectively. Data analysis practiced routinely received an 89% strongly agree response but had 6% agree and 5% remain neutral. 81% of the responders strongly agreed that the principal understands how students learn while 13% agree and 6% disagree. Finally, the response of 80% who strongly agreed and 9% who agreed that the school had an overall expectation for parents to participate in improving student achievement, leaves the question of why 2% remained neutral and 9% disagreed about this same topic.

Assessments being a vital part of instruction received a 73% strongly agree response with 18% recording agree. This same area received disagree and strongly disagree from 5% and 4% of the responders respectively. Staff decision making received strongly agree from 73% of the responders and agree response from 16% with 5% remaining neutral and 6% who disagreed. While teacher leadership, the principal’s effective use of teacher talent, and the principal’s ability to stimulate professional growth in faculty meetings received a strongly
agree from 69%, 69%, and 67% respectively each also had an additional 18%, 18%, and 22% with agree. Teacher leadership also received a 2% neutral response and 5% disagree and 6% strongly disagree response. Teacher involvement in their evaluation received a strongly agree from 56% of the responders and 22% responding agree. The remaining responses to teacher involvement in evaluation yielded 2% neutral, 16% disagree, and 4% strongly disagree.

Two of the three remaining responses of strongly agree fell below 50% and were from the standard related to strategic leadership which included vision shared by all staff with a strongly agree response percentage of 5% and agree response percentage of 89%, the remaining 6% were neutral. The school’s vision being a key element of change with 13% who strongly agreed and 56% who agreed, neutral responses were received from 16% and 9% disagreed with 6% who strongly disagreed. Finally, the use of funds to obtain resources for teachers received a 33% response of strongly agree, with an additional 56% responding agree with the remaining 11% giving a disagree response.

When combining the survey responses and aligning the questions to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives there was a high percentage of teachers who strongly agreed or agreed the principals had characteristics in each standard. On the following page Table III displays the number and percentage of respondents to the survey questions grouped by standard according to the North Carolina Standards for School Executives.
Table III Summary of Teacher Survey Responses by NCSSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NC Standards for School Executives</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
<td>72.00%</td>
<td>11.00%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Leadership</td>
<td>81.00%</td>
<td>13.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Leadership</td>
<td>79.00%</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>6.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Leadership</td>
<td>62.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
<td>14.00%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Leadership</td>
<td>74.00%</td>
<td>22.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Development Leadership</td>
<td>84.00%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-political Leadership</td>
<td>71.00%</td>
<td>17.00%</td>
<td>17.00%</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement Leadership</td>
<td>91.00%</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A descriptive comparison of the constructed responses as well as the interview responses are a part of the final section of this chapter.

**Constructed Response Analysis**

The constructed response items varied somewhat by the individual but were generally one word or very simple phrases to answer the questions. A summary of responses is presented in Tables IV and V on the following pages. As an overall summary, the responses matched with many of the things discussed in interviews with principals.

Table IV Summary of Constructed Response Item 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What factors do you believe contributed to your high school’s turnaround?</td>
<td>1. The clearly communicated and highly publicized pressure from the judicial system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Finally realizing we weren’t giving our children what they needed to be successful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table IV Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What factors do you believe contributed to your high school’s turnaround? | 3. Communication is critical  
4. Part of the solution Getting rid of teachers who were not a part of the solution  
5. Improving attitudes  
6. Raising expectations  
7. Believing in ourselves so students believed too  
8. Utilizing data to know what students learned and didn’t learn  
9. Developing PLCs  
10. The Framework for Action and professional development for teachers  
11. Parent and community involvement at the school  
12. Change  
13. Knowing it had to be done, we had to get in the trenches and figure out how. We worked together better and supported one another through the difficult times. Trusting and believing kept us going. We trusted the leadership and believed the kids could do it  
14. A strong leader is the key. The leader doesn’t have to know all of the answers but has to know how to find them or support students and teachers in finding.  
15. A leader who clearly focuses on students and teachers recognizing we are the ones interacting with our students every day.  
16. A change in the culture of the school, failure was not an option  
17. Learning how to teach all students, no longer could we teach to the middle, we had to figure out how to reach every student because we were accountable to and for them all  
18. Visibility of the principal |
Table V *Summary of Constructed Response Item 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What role did the principal play in turning the school around?          | 1. He was leading the endeavor in every way  
2. He participated in every professional development we did and led by example  
3. Make tough decisions in the best interest of students  
4. He let people go that needed to go because teaching and learning were not occurring  
5. He understood all of the pressures we were under and he was there with us  
6. Our principal was the decision maker when he needed to be or a participant when he could. He gave us leadership responsibilities and held us accountable for getting the job done.  
7. He eliminated distractors so we could teach  
8. He recognized meeting small goals along the way and allowed us to change direction if something wasn’t working  
9. He made sure everyone knew the goals and individually helped us identify professional goals that aligned with turnaround  
10. He made sure we knew our data and would sit with the department to analyze the data and determine next steps  
11. He worked as hard or harder than we did and we knew it  
12. Cheerleader, ring master, and the jack of all trades |
Teacher Working Conditions Survey Review

After summarizing the data from the survey, I reviewed the 2008 and 2010 results summary from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS), looking specifically at the School Leadership section. Not surprising, all three high schools showed an improvement in teacher agreement between 2008 and 2010. During the 2010 school year the schools would have been in North Carolina Turnaround Program for four years. Each high school had an overall increase in agree responses ranging from 17.21% to 30.24%. Each of the sub categories in the two questions also showed improvement in the agreement responses from teachers at the school. It is important to note that the staff had some turnover during the two year span of the survey. Tables VI, VII, and VIII on the following pages give specific information regarding teacher response for each of the three high schools.

Table VI 2008 & 2010 NCTWCS Summary Comparison Results High School 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Agree 2008</th>
<th>% Agree 2010</th>
<th>2-yr. Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. The faculty and staff have a shared vision.</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. The school leadership consistently supports teachers.</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction.</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching.</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. The procedures for teacher evaluation are consistent.</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table VI Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>g. The school improvement team provides effective leadership at this school.</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Average</strong></td>
<td>70.69</td>
<td>88.83</td>
<td>18.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q7.3 The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Leadership issues</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Facilities and resources</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. The use of time in my school</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Professional development</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. New teacher support</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Average</strong></td>
<td>69.35</td>
<td>88.16</td>
<td>19.74</td>
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</table>

Table VII 2008 & 2010 NCTWCS Summary Comparison Results High School 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2-yr. Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>The faculty and staff have a shared vision.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>The school leadership consistently supports teachers.</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>The procedures for teacher evaluation are consistent.</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>The school improvement team provides effective leadership at this school.</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>97.2</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Average</strong></td>
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</tr>
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</table>
The questions from the NCTWCS loosely align with the NCSSE. While not as specific, the questions from the survey ask about vision, respect, support, instruction, feedback, evaluation, and staff involvement in decision making. Other questions relate to scheduling, professional development, leadership and support within the context of how teachers feel the school leadership responds to concerns raised. Lastly, it should be noted that school leadership is left up to the interpretation of the teacher and may include other administrators in the school such as assistant principals, deans of student, curriculum administrators and others. Therefore, the information from the TWCS may not speak specifically about the principal alone like the survey given for this study.
Alignment of NC Standards for School Executives and Turnaround Principals

Based on the findings of this research the North Carolina Standards for School Executives align with the expectations of a turnaround principal. However, they do not go deep enough or specific enough to recognize all of the necessary traits a turnaround principal must have. One of the superintendents interviewed discussed this in detail, “The standards are the tip of the iceberg. A turnaround principal must exhibit all of the standards but he or she must do more.” One of the principals also felt the standards and evaluation instrument were clearly aligned but did not really identify the work he believed turned the school around. He continued by saying, “I feel like the standards provide a general rubric to follow for all principals but a turnaround principal has do more in all areas, more than others. After my first year as principal I would have told you Standard 2: Instructional Leadership was the most important and in order to improve in that area some of the other standards may not have been addressed. If I had been evaluated with that instrument my performance would have been glowing in some areas and non-existent in others.” Another principal shared, “I knew the standards and knew what they meant but I’m not sure my evaluation with these standards would have defined me as an effective leader. There are so many things in a challenging school that sometimes have to be addressed immediately pushing others to the back burner.”

The Standards

Strategic Leadership is summarized so that school executives will create conditions that result in strategically re-imaging the school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century. This first standard focuses on conditions that result in a vision, mission, and goal. From this study the vision and mission were already defined, “...improve student
achievement, it’s just that simple,” one principal shared. While all candidates expressed some level of expectation for a turnaround principal to have a vision, none of the participants believed turnaround wouldn’t happen without one.

Instructional Leadership expects school executives will set high standards for the professional practice of 21st century instruction and assessment that result in a no nonsense accountable environment. Instructional leadership is defined in many ways but for a turnaround principal it is clear, “If you don’t know good instruction how can you possibly help teachers improve their practice,” one principal commented. A superintendent echoed his thoughts by saying, “Would you want a doctor who didn’t know medicine? Why would we put a leader in a school, expect them to change instructional practice and improve student achievement when they don’t know good instruction themselves?” Teachers strongly supported the need for a good instructional leader in the survey. Teachers also added the need for a turnaround principal to know good instruction and understand student learning. One principal commented in the interview, “I don’t have to know every curriculum standard, goal or objective, but I do have to know how to recognize when teaching is resulting in student learning and when it isn’t. I believe this standard could almost encompass some of the others because we know the instruction is what determines learning and I learned through my turnaround experience you can’t have one without the other.”

Cultural Leadership implies the school executive will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school’s culture contributes to the exemplary performance of the school. The culture of high expectations presented as a common theme in all interviews and the survey. Linking these expectations to building culture in a turnaround
school is a necessary component to improvement. One principal shared, “If we expect failure we’re going to get it. I had to help the staff learn to expect success. We as human beings often meet the expectations laid before us so if they are low we conform; if they are high we meet the challenge.” Culture in turnaround schools is sometimes referred to as toxic, as described by a superintendent. He goes on to say, “A toxic culture is what got the school where it is in the first place. The turnaround principal has to spend more time building a culture of high expectations, reversing toxicity and making it healthy. This is one place where the turnaround principal has to go beyond the normal standard and reverse the negative culture.”

Human Resource Leadership expects school executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community by ensuring that processes and systems are in place that results in the recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of a high performing staff. All three of the principals interviewed agreed, sharing it became necessary early on to have conversations with teachers about their future. One principal shared, “The first difficult conversation I had with a teacher was very emotional for her. I had to keep my emotions and compassion for people in check and remember the conversation and eventual dismissal of this teacher was best for students. I couldn’t allow anyone to continue to hurt children by not providing them the education they deserved. It was never easy to dismiss or remove a teacher, and it never should be, but when you know you are doing it for the students it makes it bearable.” The personnel director also shared, “We hired these principals and expect them to exercise human resource leadership. Sometimes it requires a great deal more dismissing teacher than an administrator might expect but we at the district level have
to support these efforts and assure the principal along the way. Documenting and dismissing one teacher can be a full time job, when you talk about removing over 50% of the staff it is daunting.” Teacher survey responses related to human resource leadership ranged across the scale given. In some of the constructed responses teachers wrote specifically about the principal having to remove and hire new staff. In contrast, however, the multiple choice survey item about the principal’s effective use of each teacher’s capacity and talent yielded a 13% response of disagree. While the teachers in the survey identified the need to eliminate ineffective teachers it seems they are less confident in the principal’s ability to effectively use teachers’ capacity and talent.

Managerial Leadership for school executives ensures that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem solving, communicating expectations, and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building. Communication came out of the interviews and survey as an area of strength for the turnaround principals in this study. Scheduling and some autonomy and flexibility with scheduling were recognized as a needed practice by both central office staff and the principals as well as by the teachers who responded to the survey. While in some regards a managerial leader has taken a less prominent role than an instructional leader, the turnaround principals recognize the need to identify and solve problems quickly while ensuring all understand the expectations of change for the turnaround school. One principal put it like this, “I knew I had to have all balls in the air juggling at the same time while I identified those main things to change. I lived the first six weeks scared to go around the next corner because of the uncertainty of the problem I would face.” Another principal shared, “I lived through that first semester but by second
semester we seemed to be closer to being of one accord. By focusing on our three main areas some of the more managerial issues seemed to take care of themselves.”

External Development Leadership expects the school executive will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership. This again is an area where the turnaround principal has to take it to the extreme. “While a principal is expected to be at school when the doors are open, in a turnaround environment, it’s almost a curse if you aren’t at the school, in the community, and at every place every time,” one principal reflects. He goes on to say, “I realized how much it meant to the community to see me when they began responding to my phone calls home quicker, coming to school when I needed them and offering support to our efforts instead of tirelessly defending their child when they knew the child had to change their behavior.” A superintendent shared that the district had to support the principal’s work in engaging the community. “If a principal needed some air time at a board meeting, I felt it was my responsibility to make it happen. That principal needs my support and if a presentation to the school board would help engage the larger community then I made it happen.” All of the survey responders and the people interviewed agreed; it takes the engagement of all school personnel, parents, students, and the community to improve student achievement.

Micro-political Leadership focuses on the school executive building systems and relationships that utilize the staff’s diversity and encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power, and influence to realize the school’s vision for success. This area is a little less intense when understanding the turnaround principal’s focus. “As a principal I wanted to be sure I learned the strengths of the people in the school and
match their strengths to a need. Ultimately my responsibility was to improve student achievement and while I respect and appreciate diversity some of the problems in the school when I arrived was no one understood a common goal. Everyone worked in their own microcosm with their own set of rules and expectations,” one principal shared. This could be one of the standards addressed lightly when focusing on evaluating a turnaround principal. One superintendent shared, “I might bring micro-political conversations up in the evaluation once the turnaround principal has established themselves and experienced some level of success. Right out of the gate, I don’t think so, I want them to focus more intensely on those areas they identify as high need and make some tangible improvements.”

Academic Achievement Leadership expects the school executive to contribute to the academic success of students. While this standard was not in place during the years of NC Turnaround, all people interviewed as well as the teacher survey identified this as an area a turnaround principal needed to shine. “As the new principal I knew data. I knew how to understand it and translate it to people who may not understand it as well. This was the area I felt most comfortable so I shared it every opportunity I got,” one principal shared. Another principal believed if he could help everyone including students and families/communities understand what academic success really looked like then student achievement would increase and students could experience true success. “It’s one thing to praise students, give award and recognition, but it adds depth and meaning when they understand how they achieved the recognition. Students are smart and know when they truly experience pride in their work. We had to use the data to help them understand where they were and where they needed to be. One of the best memories I have is when the least motivated student in the
school ran, literally ran to find me when his EOC score was a 3. He had passed and knew he had done it!” a heartfelt comment from one principal.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the role of the turnaround principal is complex. One superintendent put it best saying, “It takes a special person to be a turnaround principal. Not everyone can do it and not everyone should.” Moving a school from historically failing to a thriving learning environment for students is nothing short of a miracle. This chapter has developed a story with the research to begin to paint a picture of turnaround leadership. Chapter 5 will take this research and compare it to other research and offer suggestions for future research. At the same time, information gleaned from this study may also provide some ideas for future practice. As the curriculum, assessments, and accountability standards have all changed in the state of North Carolina, turnaround school numbers are likely to increase. Understanding how to identify and develop turnaround leaders could become an even greater necessity to ensure student academic success.
Chapter Five

Discussion

From recent research by the Foundation Strategy Group (FSG), a nonprofit consulting firm dedicated to finding better ways to solve social problems, *The School Turnaround Field Guide* was published in 2010. They report more than 5,000 schools across the nation are chronically failing and the number of failing schools has doubled over the past two years with similar expected results in the next two years. Despite the vast amount of activity and interest in the field of school turnaround, the effort is still in its infant stage. The focus and interest is growing quickly, but remains somewhat disjointed and uncertain with limited research upon which to reflect and expand. Educational reformers continue to try and determine what is working and how to replicate what works on a larger scale before the numbers of failing schools grows into a chronic epidemic.

The purposes for this study were intended to provide more specific evidence about leadership and standards in low-achieving schools to provide more information to both researchers and practitioners. To gain a specific understanding of the successful work of the North Carolina Turnaround program, this study addressed three research questions:

RQ1: What factors do principals believe attributed to the turnaround in student achievement for three high schools in rural North Carolina?

RQ2: What leadership factors do teachers believe cause schools to make significant improvement in student achievement?

RQ3: In what ways do the school executive standards align to the effective practices of leading school turnaround as identified in this study?
When considering the factors contributing to successful school turnaround current
and past research agrees, the leader is critical. Steiner and Hassel (2008) conducted research
showing that the guidance of an effective leader is necessary to turn a school around. They
go on further to state this leader’s actions must identify the path to a quick, intense, and
sustainable effort of improvement. Even successful leaders from other schools may not have
the same success in a school where failure is pervasive. The research establishes the
importance of having a principal who is an instructional leader, manager, and facilitator. This
study supports that research and defines this instructional leadership with specific knowledge
of effective instructional practice and knowledge of how students learn.

Consistent with the research, the leader or principal in the school must have a
sustained competent approach to leading with clear expectations. Likewise, the ability to
communicate these expectations is paramount to establishing sustainable turnaround in
schools. As expected, communication emerged as an important aspect of being a new
principal in a turnaround high school. The consistent communication to students, teachers,
parents, and the community is supported in the research as the mechanism by which a leader
sets the direction for improvement and begins the process for developing a strategic plan for
improvement. Though called a variety of titles throughout research, the plan for improvement
was really emphasized in this study as a living document, *A Framework for Action* that
strategically addressed areas for improvement and established a common ground for all.

This study also focused on elements of turnaround beyond the leader. Factors found
in historical research as well as more recent work focus around the use of data for school
improvement. Lead actions in turnaround as discussed by Kowal and Hassel (2011) include
this out front analysis and use of data. They go on to include the importance of people knowing the data and the data becoming very public. The principals, teachers, and central office personnel as well as the standards in this study also link the analysis of data to turning around these schools. The study goes on further to discuss the importance of using all data, not just test scores, to engage in dialogue around school improvement but more specifically use the data as objective measures to discuss the effect of instructional practice, whether it be positive or negative.

An additional factor found in this study as well as previous research relates to the culture of a school and the importance of establishing a culture of high academic expectations as well as a culture of inclusive practices with parents and the community. All of the successful principals in this study spoke of the culture when they arrived and the culture they developed. Most cultures centered on raising expectations for student and adult performance in the classroom and included academics and behaviors. When defining culture current research of effective high schools states, “culture is defined by a shared focus on high expectations for students and emphasis on students’ academic needs among the administration, staff, and faculty of the school. Students internalize these cultural values, as well, to take responsibility for their own learning and work together to promote their academic success” (Routledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin,. Roberts, & Comer, 2012, p. 8).

School culture in this study had to develop by the school experiencing some success and gained support from teachers, leaders, families, students, and the community as a whole. Other research further explains culture in terms of a redesign of the organization.
Specifically, an effective culture of school turnaround is one in which the systems within the school works for all students and is supported in the schools in this study and evidenced in their improvement in test scores and the pervasive belief that only 100% proficiency was good enough.

Based on the findings in this study the standards for school executives illustrate the complexity of a principal’s responsibilities. However, as expressed from both central office staff and principals they do not appear to be explicit enough for what is needed in a turnaround school. While all of the standards appear directly or indirectly in the hiring practices and daily activities of principals studied they may not address the specific needs of a school in turnaround. The standards which are grounded in leadership research provide the frame for the work of a principal. In a turnaround school the focus must be on those high yield practices that will have a significant and immediate effect on student performance. Since the standards are the foundation for the evaluation instrument used in North Carolina, it is my belief that adaptations should be made to the standards to allow the turnaround principal the autonomy to narrow the focus and concentrate on those areas directly tied to student achievement. Furthermore, the timeline of the evaluation of these standards should be revised in turnaround environments to allow the necessary changes made an opportunity to impact student achievement.

**Implications for Research**

This study has important implications for school turnaround policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Clearly, there is a need for more research on what standards provide the foundation for turnaround work so future turnaround efforts can impact student
achievement quickly and build a culture of high expectations for students and adults. As policy makers, education leaders, and researchers continue to learn the best strategies and practices to turnaround our lowest-performing schools, it becomes increasingly evident that school turnaround takes time and could be longer than previous research estimates. Policy, whether grounded in research or not, affects practice and is the starting point for standards and accountability. In-depth studies of school turnaround need to be carefully crafted to better understand how the policy and standards play out in schools and how long it might realistically take to turnaround a school. It is this expectation of rapid improvement that differentiates turnaround from other school improvement strategies. In theory, rapid improvement in our lowest-performing schools should be the only option. In particular, turnaround high schools where students have only 4 years to complete their K-12 education need immediate results in order to meet the needs of all students. Unfortunately, while rapid improvement is ideal, it might not be realistic to expect or feasible to achieve, especially at the high school level.

Committed educators and the quality of instruction are essential to the success of school turnaround (Herman et al., 2008). While this study looked closely at three rural high schools, where the turnaround efforts were led by three male principals, future research may also include an in-depth look at gender and if gender matters in leading turnaround schools. Based on the findings of this study, additional research is needed to identify these committed individuals and expand a pipeline of turnaround experts that assists schools and districts in the recruitment and retention of effective educators. While strategic staffing and professional development have received recent attention in the research arena, more work needs to be
done to assist practitioners in developing recruitment programs and processes that result in effective educators for turnaround schools. In essence, a greater understanding of how to effectively staff low-performing schools is needed. More specifically, taking the work of successful turnaround leaders and identifying the commonalities to develop further. In addition, building on the work of The New Teacher Project, the *Irreplaceables* (2012) identifies the impact a poor educator has on students and student achievement. This profound research details the impact on student learning when a highly effective teacher leaves and even more when that highly effective teacher, the irreplaceable, is replaced with an ineffective teacher. This research suggests a highly effective teacher produces as much as 5 to 6 more months of student learning per year than a poor performer. Digging deeper into this research to identify how to draw these irreplaceable teachers into low-performing schools could help improve the quality of the staff as a whole and improve instruction that better meets the needs of all students.

Quality instruction is the first line of defense to improve and prevent student failure. This study identified the importance of the turnaround leader understanding good instructional practices and went further to say the importance of that leader knowing how students learn. More research is needed to determine how to develop these leaders that understand teaching and learning and how they transfer this knowledge into practice that drastically improves student performance in the school. If the curriculum and assessments are aligned, the research could focus on how leaders ensure quality instruction is occurring and resulting in improved student achievement.
While there is some research about the role of the families and communities in the life of the school as well as the student, there is a need for more. When considering schools in turnaround, the wrap around services and necessity for a common understanding of grade level work and overall student outcomes as well as high expectations for all, more research could assist in identifying factors that have the largest impact or influence on improving student achievement. To define the relationship between the school and family would be helpful if that relationship identified specific practices or patterns that had a profound effect on historically low-achieving schools. Increasing the specificity of parent/community involvement to determine those practices directly linked to improving student learning could help a school in turnaround utilize the services within the community to help with overall improvement.

A final but significant aspect for continued research is a specific focus on building the capacity of others and the sustainability of initiatives that directly impact student achievement. While there is research on the importance of growing leaders, building relationships within the school and the community, and collaboration between school, home and community, an in depth look at those factors that have had the most significant impact on improving student achievement could help turnaround principals develop a laser focus on improvement. An additional consideration might include tracing the careers of turnaround leaders and continuing to study the schools after they leave. As a result, the focus has the potential to expedite the school improvement process and build the capacity of people in the school, as well as establish and support the work of all stakeholders in order to keep turnaround ongoing and sustainable. A deep dive into understanding that sustaining and
maintaining are not the same and sustaining by definition means to continue to improve with the practices in place or changing and adjusting as the situation warrants to continue to improve helps support the active process for turnaround.

Implications for Practice

To end the cycle of failure, schools need fundamental changes that address the root causes of their pervasive performance problems. Turning around a low-performing school is difficult work and requires a change in practices, beliefs, expectations, and often personnel to drastically improve. There is very little disagreement that turnaround requires a special leader with certain competencies and actions, a focused plan, the targeted utilization of data to inform instructional practices and routinely gives information about student progress. The support and buy-in from the school and local community, families, and the district as a whole are also factors to be included. In the following section several implications for practice in turnaround schools are described to increase or expand current practices in the field that can impact low-performing schools and set their direction toward improving student achievement and success.

Leadership

In considering all low-performing schools, not just the ones engaged in turnaround, the threat of turnaround could possibly make it even more difficult for low-performing schools to attract strong leaders. Consider a quality candidate who is looking for a principal job. As with possible teachers, the threat of turnaround could likely dissuade strong principal candidates from working at low-performing schools. If schools and districts are able to meet the challenge of attracting strong principal candidates to work in turnaround
schools, the next challenge would be to retain those principals, offering schools the benefit of strong stable leadership. Considering that turnaround is not a one-time event, but instead a process of sustained effort, leadership stability should be considered an important element of school turnaround. Fullan (2006) suggests that once a strong leader is in place, that person “stays the course through continuity of good direction by leveraging leadership” (p. 44). Fullan emphasizes that a principal remain in a school for at least three years to make this happen. Regrettably, principal turnover and mobility tend to be higher at low-performing schools (Gates et al., 2006). Ultimately, high levels of principal turnover can frustrate progress and deny schools the stable leadership they need to succeed. Districts need to consider how to support leadership stability in turnaround schools to make the job doable and reduce burnout possibly through an administrative team approach that equalizes the pressure of being a heroic leader. This could potentially build strong turnaround leaders and result in initial quick wins that develop into sustainable improvements.

**Develop a Pipeline of New Leaders**

In supporting schools in need of turnaround leaders, district leaders across the United States have noted that the number of principals with demonstrated success in high need schools is often not sufficient to meet the needs of all low-performing schools in a district, (Knudson, Shambough, & O’Day, 2011). This is especially true in small or rural districts with fewer available leaders and limited recruiting power. In essence, a supply and demand situation occurs where the demand is greater than the supply of qualified school leaders. One concept to answer this need is the idea of a pipeline for school leaders through a collaborative approach between universities and school districts, sometimes including partnerships with
other private or state agencies. This collaborative approach to identifying, training, and placing turnaround principals exemplifies the need for community, local, and state involvement in turning around these lowest-performing schools. Figure IV is a graphic representation of a system supported by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction in partnership with the North Carolina University System illustrating a principal pipeline.

**NC Principal Pipeline and Placement for Turnaround Schools**

![Diagram of NC Principal Pipeline and Placement for Turnaround Schools](image)

Figure IV NC Principal Pipeline and Placement for Turnaround Schools, Braaten, E. (2013)

In considering this pipeline, turnaround leaders may need a differentiated leadership preparation program that targets specifically identified turnaround deficits. While research is limited on the quality of differentiated principal preparation programs, a few have shown a
promising differentiated approach. In the School Leadership Pipeline Series: Part 2 (2012), funded by the Donnell Kay Foundation, Kim Knous Dolan writes, “The University of Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program requires that whole districts (not just schools) apply and send a seven-member team to the Specialist Program — a 2-year program, that draws upon training in both UVA’s education and business schools to train turnaround leaders. Mastery Schools is a charter management organization that currently operates a network of ten turnaround schools in Philadelphia. Their turnaround approach integrates solid management and effective educational strategies. Successful turnarounds require high expectations and high levels of support. As a result, they have achieved impressive results around student growth and achievement. Scholar Academics (Philadelphia) and Lead Academy (Nashville), are CMOs that are making their primary growth investment in school turnarounds and are training leaders for this work.

Get Smart Schools, is the only known principal preparation program in Colorado that has recently begun preparing principals to work as leaders in school turnarounds. Get Smart Schools is supporting veteran leaders with a track record of success who are interested in being trained to work as school turnaround leaders.” (p.7)

Plan of Action

Reformers, policy makers, and educators need to be more realistic about how much time and resources it takes to successfully implement organizational change, especially within a school. The resources have to be provided in order to develop a strategic plan of action for improvement. The Framework for Action, referenced in Chapter 4, allowed principals an opportunity to develop a laser-like focus on those areas of the school that would
quickly impact student achievement. Though this plan may not have provided a comprehensive approach to reform, it targeted those areas of greatest need that were negatively impacting student learning and allowed the school to target those areas first to show gains in their performance. Training and experience in developing and implementing this specific plan continues to be needed in schools which are failing. While some school improvement plans, school reform plans, or scopes of work provide a big picture approach to improving schools, these schools with chronic low performance need a much more focused and strategic plan. The plan for a turnaround school must focus on the areas that will improve instruction and student learning and ensure the highest quality professionals are in the building to move the school forward. Andrew Calkins, William Guenther, Grace Belfiore, and Dave Lash in *The Turnaround Challenge* (2007) report point out that plans of action are rarely implemented exactly as planned, and suggest that there will be steps backwards for every step forwards. With this in mind, turnaround is likely to take longer than expected.

Keeping in mind the resistance and issues usually found in any change, additional time coupled with the plan should be given to the school with the understanding from the district leadership as well as the school board and local community that it takes more time to reverse the trends of failure. This complete reform in teaching and learning must have the understanding and support of the community and the district with an understanding that the issues within the school are complex and often times entrenched, making them difficult to change. In these situations many times training and understanding for the district administration and school board are needed to understand how the school became a low-performing school and the steps that will be necessary to reverse that trend. Utilizing this
situation as an opportunity to further educate, the district and school board can begin to model data-driven decision making beyond the school using the turnaround school as the example to follow.

Data Driven Practices

Data driven practices within the school help leaders, leadership teams, and the total school community understand empirical evidence that is difficult to dispute. Feelings, emotions, attitudes, and perceptions can cause strong emotional responses in people to act and believe in ways that are counterproductive. However, as shared earlier in this study, “the numbers don’t lie”. Leaders have described ongoing data use as critical because it allows time to quickly determine if a strategy or intervention being used is having a positive impact on student learning. While the primary focus of most federal and state accountability systems is test results, school leaders consider multiple data sources such as benchmark assessments, surveys, culture, attendance, and teacher/parent/community feedback as well as observations to determine direction and influence goal setting for turnaround. The school community can often help pinpoint school needs and possible approaches to meet those needs. The goal or best practice in data driven practices is that all are data and that data analysis drives decision making processes and results in changes in practice that positively influence student outcomes and overall school improvement, ultimately resulting in positive sustainable change.

Community, Family and District Support

The success of turnaround schools and their communities are often connected beyond the physical location with deep-rooted history and culture. Schools in disadvantaged
communities are often the most difficult to change or improve, making the relationship between such schools and communities that much more important (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010). Bryk et al. (2010) stress the importance of parent and community ties with schools, and suggest that schools need to find ways to build relationships with parents and the community. They offer three specific dimensions in which these relationships can develop: “(1) Teachers need to be knowledgeable about student culture and the local community and draw on these in their lessons, (2) School staff must reach out to parents and community to engage them in the processes of strengthening student learning, and (3) Schools should draw on a network of community organizations to expand services for students and their families” (p. 11). The interconnectedness between schools and the culture of the community coupled with the history of the school and families can often make the resistance to change more personal and deeply emotional. In situations like these a sincere emphasis on building trust between turnaround leaders and the school community as well as the larger community as a whole is critical to making change that will last. It is essential to honor the history of the school while focusing on improvement.

*Flexibility of Standards and Evaluation*

Finally, when considering turnaround schools and leadership the standards in place must have some flexibility. These standards, while determined in this study as a whole provide a basis for effective leadership; have to be used with flexibility in turnaround situations. The emphasis in turnaround is focused on improving student achievement. Schools are a complex organization of system, processes, and people but in turnaround schools an additional element of urgency complicates an already complicated environment.
When standards are in place and must be rigidly followed it makes turnaround more difficult and may prevent improvement. Initially, turnaround has to focus on those areas that will provide the most impact in the shortest amount of time. Recognizing many systems in the school may be in need of improvement, identifying those areas that are most closely tied to student achievement is imperative to make gains quickly. When the standards can be used as a flexible tool for evaluation, the turnaround leader can be allowed to decide the areas of emphasis. These areas that will directly impact student learning will bring focus around improved knowledge of instructional practices, accountability, and assessment. With the laser-like focus on these areas, the turnaround leader will have specific communication about expectations and outcomes for students, staff, families, and the community which will help in building a culture of high expectations for the school. A turnaround leader can place emphasis on these areas and the evaluation can directly connect with the work in these areas and as changes begin to result in student achievement, additional standards can be addressed.

Likewise, consideration could be given to principals in a turnaround environment when utilizing the results from the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey. While this study clearly showed an improvement in two years of data on the teacher working conditions responses regarding leadership in 2006 and 2008, future practice might allow some discretion in utilizing these responses for the turnaround leader’s evaluation. An awareness or expectation that teachers’ responses on the survey will be lower due to stress-inducing changes, teacher exhaustion or burnout could provide support to turnaround principals required to remove ineffective teachers and focus on building a culture of high expectations and improved student achievement.
Conclusion

In conclusion, turnaround is a growing concept in schools. The emphasis on turning around historically low-performing schools continues to grow and research around the specific practices that resulted in changing a failing school continues to gain attention. In an age of increased accountability, competition and global change, standards and expectations will continue to drive evaluation and performance as well as establish similarities and differences between successful and failing schools. The NC Standards for School Executives are no exception and clearly identify the areas of a complex education system through which a school leader takes responsibility.

While the standards are very detailed and really have an emphasis on all areas of the school, a turnaround leader has to be able to identify which areas will gain the quickest impact on student achievement and reverse a trend of failure. The critical aspect will be the ability for schools and districts to utilize the standards for a principal in a turnaround school by supporting the principal in prioritizing and focusing on certain standards. Allowing the turnaround principal the autonomy to create the laser focus on the areas of greatest need to improve student achievement will build a successful program. The district, community, and staff engagement in implementing the strategic focus can have an immediate impact on students and reverse a historical trend of low performance and expectations. As shown in Figure V, the North Carolina Standards for School Executives provide the satellite blueprint for leadership, but it’s not enough for the turnaround principal (Figure V).
The turnaround principal must customize the blueprint to specifically improve those areas of deficit inhibiting student achievement to build a school of successful academic performance.
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Appendices
Appendix A: Letter to Superintendent

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Nancy Barbour and I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University. I also work as the Assistant Director of District and School Transformation at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. I am writing to request your permission to interview you or your human resources administrator about the success one of the high schools in your district experienced when they were a part of North Carolina Turnaround. My dissertation title is *Principal Leadership and Standards: Lessons Learned in Three Rural High Schools that participated in North Carolina’s Turnaround Initiative*. My goal is to study through three lens, teacher, principal, and central office what actually occurred to make such significant improvements in schools with historical low performance on End of Course Tests. Further, I want to look at how these occurrences align with the new North Carolina Standards for School Executives.

If you are in agreement with my interviewing you or your central office staff, please sign this letter and date it and send it back to me. Feel free to use the enclosed self-addressed envelope or you can scan and e-mail it to me at mnbarbour@gmail.com. Thank you so much and I look forward to sharing my findings with you. All of the information in the study will be confidential but I am happy to give you a copy of the final report upon your request. I am excited about the improvements made in your school system and look forward to the opportunity to learn about the success from the people who made it happen.

Sincerely,

Nancy Barbour
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Central Office Staff

1. What factors do you believe contributed to the high school’s turnaround?
2. What role did the principal play in the turning the school around?
3. How did you select the principal to turn the school around?
4. Did you utilize the North Carolina Standards for School Executives when hiring the principal? Why or why not?
5. Discuss the pros and cons of the new evaluation instrument based on the NCSSE.
6. What do you believe is the most important skill a principal must have in order to turn a school around?
Appendix C: Interview Questions for Turnaround Principal

1. Can you identify specific strategies you used that were particularly impactful in turning around your school?
2. What role did you play in turning the school around?
3. What advice would you give future aspiring leaders of turnaround schools?
4. What is one very simple thing school principals could quickly implement that would improve school performance?
5. What did you try that didn’t work?

**Strategic Leadership:**
6. What was your vision for the school’s success?

**Instructional Leadership:**
7. How do you identify good teaching procedures and classroom instruction?
8. How do you know students are learning?

**Cultural Leadership:**
9. What role did the school’s culture play in the turnaround process?
10. Describe your expectations for faculty meetings and professional development.

**Human Resource Leadership:**
11. Describe teacher turnover during your years as principal.
12. How did you utilize the Teacher Working Conditions Survey?
13. How do you know and recognize the talent of good teachers?

**Managerial Leadership:**
14. How were funds utilized to provide resources for students and teachers?
15. How did you develop the schedule to maximize student learning time?

**External Development Leadership:**
16. How did you include parents and the community in improving student achievement?

**Micro-political Leadership:**
17. How did you build the relationships with staff members to begin the turnaround?

**Academic Achievement Leadership:**
18. Standard 8 was not a part of your evaluation during your tenure but, how did you contribute to the academic success of students?
19. How did you use data?
In looking at the North Carolina Evaluation of School Executives Instrument, how did it impact your practice, if at all?
Appendix D: Questions for Teacher Survey

Please respond to the questions below based on your experience with your Turnaround Principal (insert principal’s name)

What factors do you believe contributed to your high school’s turnaround?

What role did the principal play in turning the school around?

Each question will be rated on the scale below:
SA  Strongly Agree
A   Agree
N   Neutral
D   Disagree
SD  Strongly Disagree

**Strategic Leadership:** School executives will create conditions that result in strategically re-imaging the school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century.

1. The vision of the school is the key for school change in my school.
2. The school staff embraces the vision of the principal for school success

**Instructional Leadership:** School executives will set high standards for the professional practice of 21st century instruction and assessment that result in a no nonsense accountable environment

3. My school principal understands and recognizes good teaching procedures.
4. The principal understands how students learn.
5. Assessment is perceived as a vital part of the instructional process.

**Cultural Leadership:** School executives will understand and act on the understanding of the important role a school’s culture contributes to the exemplary performance of the school.

6. Our principal’s leadership in faculty meetings challenges and stimulates our professional growth
7. The culture of the school is conducive to learning.

**Human Resource Leadership:** School executives will ensure that the school is a professional learning community. School executives will ensure that processes and systems are in place that results in the recruitment, induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of a high performing staff.

8. I am involved in my evaluation on an ongoing basis
9. My principal makes effective use of the individual teacher’s capacity and talent
Managerial Leadership: School executives will ensure that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem solving, communicating expectations and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building.

10. The lines and methods of communication between teachers and the principal in our school are well developed and maintained.
11. The principal manages funds to ensure that the school has the best resources to teach the students
12. The schedule in my school maximizes student learning time.

External Development Leadership: A school executive will design structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership.

13. The school includes parents and community in raising student achievement expectations.
14. The principal expects teachers to communicate with parents regularly.

Micro-political Leadership: The school executive will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff’s diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power and influence to realize the school’s vision for success.

15. The staff makes decisions concerning teaching and learning with the principal.
16. Teacher leadership is recognized and supported by the administration

Academic Achievement Leadership: The school executive will contribute to the academic success of students

17. The principal understands the accountability system for our school
18. Analyzing data is a regular routine in this school.