ABSTRACT

EDMONDS, CATHERINE. The “NELA Experience”: How an Alternative Principal Preparation Program Impacted Principal Practice and School Achievement in Rural Elementary Schools. (Under the direction of Dr. Bonnie C. Fusarelli).

Improving school performance is difficult. It is especially challenging to implement and succeed in school turnaround in rural schools (Kutash et al., 2010). Given their widely-dispersed geographies, rural schools struggle to recruit talent to their low-performing schools located in high poverty communities (Schulken, 2010). Increasingly, attentions are turning toward promising programs that hand-pick promising rural school leaders and equip them to thrive in a geographically isolated environment where resources are limited, poverty is high, and academic achievement is lagging (Schulken, 2010). The goal of North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) is to prepare program graduates to become leaders in rural, high-need schools in northeastern North Carolina. The NELA graduates are trained as turnaround leaders with the skills needed to bring about deep change in low-performing schools to drive improvement in student performance (Fusarelli, 2009).

The purpose of this case study was two-fold: (a) to examine the impact of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on academic performance of students; and (b) to better understand the experiences, standards, and practices NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance.

The findings indicate that schools led by first-year NELA-trained principals saw gains in student proficiency and growth. The research participants attributed their impact on student achievement to their NELA preparation. Specifically, the research participants stated NELA training gave them the confidence to be a principal, the skillset and mindset to be resourceful and build relationships, and a growth mind-set in terms of problem solving.
The “NELA Experience”: How an Alternative Principal Preparation Program Impacted Principal Practice and School Achievement in Rural Elementary Schools

by

Catherine Edmonds

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Committee Chair

___________________________  __________________________
Dr. Lance D. Fusarelli  Dr. Gregory E. Hicks
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family who stood by me through this journey. I faced many challenges while on this journey, but I continued to press on. It was your strength that propped me up when I didn’t have the strength to stand.
BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Edmonds is the youngest of five daughters born to Weldon and Novella Edmonds of Oxford, NC. She matriculated through the Granville County School System and in 1988 graduated from J.F. /Webb High School. She went on to pursue a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics Education from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University.

After she graduated in 1992, she began her career as a Mathematics teacher at South Granville High School. Her deep love of mathematics set her on the path of working on a Masters of Applied Mathematics at North Carolina Central University, with the hope of one day becoming a faculty member at an Institution of Higher Education in the Mathematics Department. After the birth of her only child, Thomas, she had a different outlook on life and her professional career. She wanted to make an impact on the lives of students at the Pre-K – 12 level, as her teachers had done for her. She went on to pursue a Masters of School Administration (MSA) degree from North Carolina State University.

Catherine is currently employed at the University of North Carolina General Administration (UNC GA), in the role of Director of Educational Leadership, where she also serves as the Director of the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program. Prior to joining the UNC GA, Catherine worked as the Director and Executive Coach for the Northeast Leadership Academy District and School Transformation (NELA-DST) grant at North Carolina State University. In that position, she provided professional development, coaching, and technical assistance to aspiring school leaders in high-need schools. Prior to her work with NELA, she worked as the District Transformation Coach Team Lead for the North
Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). In that position, Catherine led reform efforts to turn around low-performing schools and improve educational outcomes for underperforming students. In 2012, the District and School Transformation Team led by Catherine received the State Superintendent’s Team Leadership Award for their outstanding performance in turnaround work. Prior to her work with NCDPI, Catherine worked in Guilford County in the role of Area Superintendent. In this position, she worked with high schools across the county. Prior to her work with Guilford County, Catherine worked with North Carolina New Schools Project (NCNSP) as a Program Director to implement early college high schools and redesigned high schools across the state. Prior to her work with NCNSP, Catherine worked as a high school principal in Granville County, where she also worked as a Math teacher.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my one and only son, Thomas. I’m so proud of the young man you have become. Thank you for always taking care of your mom. Of all my accomplishments, being your mom is the one I’m most proud. To my daughter-in-law, Claudia, thank you for being a great daughter. I love both of you!

To my parents, Weldon and Novella Edmonds, thank you for teaching me to never give up and always give 100% in everything I do. To the best sisters ever, Sandra, McShell, Pamala, and Valerie, thank you for keeping me encouraged through this journey. Each of you have played a major role in this accomplishment. Valerie, thank you for talking with me on the phone as I traveled late night from class after working all day. Sandra, thank you for driving me to each chemo session during my breast cancer battle. Pamala, thank you for being a voice of encouragement through my struggles. McShell, thank you for standing in for me at Thomas’ many activities. “Chance made us sisters, hearts made us friends” (Author Unknown).

To my dear friends, Dr. Tabitha Grossman and Krystal Thompkins. Tabitha, thank you for guiding me through the dissertation process and being there for me through many of my life journeys. Krystal, thank you for the encouragement through times when we both needed a shoulder. Both of you are the epitome of a true friend.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, thank you for your time and commitment to my academic success. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Lisa Bass, Dr. Greg Hicks, and Dr. Lance Fusarelli, thank you for your time, support, and flexibility to get me
through the dissertation process. Each of you played an integral role in my professional growth.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research study examined the impact of school leaders who completed a non-traditional principal preparation program on the academic achievement of students in the schools they lead. Interest in “school leadership development” as a major reform strategy has intensified due to the large number of low-performing schools across the nation and the shortage of quality leaders prepared and willing to take on the challenges of these failing schools. President Barack Obama stated in March 2010 at an America’s Promise Alliance event, “We know that the success of every American will be tied more closely than ever to the level of education that they achieve.” Yet, more than 5,000 schools, representing 5% of all schools in the United States, are chronically failing. These 5,000 schools serve an estimated 2.5 million students (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). Turning around the “bottom five” percent of schools is the crucible of education reform (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, Lash, & Mass, 2007).

Traditional administrative preparation programs have not attracted sufficient numbers of high-potential candidates who are committed to leadership roles in the places where they are needed most (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) cited a Public Agenda survey in which 69% of principals think that leadership training in schools of education is out of touch with the realities of today’s districts. The report, Educating School Leaders (2005), led by Arthur E. Levine, the president of Teachers College, Columbia University, states that most university-based preparation programs for administrators range in quality from “inadequate to appalling.” Effective leadership is essential to turnaround schools; however, the programs that are
preparing principals have not kept pace with the role of school leadership. This study sought to determine if a nontraditional principal preparation program adequately trained aspiring leaders to take on the challenge of leading identified low-performing schools.

**Background of the Study**

Leadership is important to school success, but there is a shortage of school leaders prepared to lead low-achieving schools. A study conducted by Winter, Rinehart, and Muñoz (2002) found that a candidate’s self-perception of his or her ability to do the job was the strongest predictor of his or her willingness to apply for a position in school leadership. This finding supports the importance of engaging potential principals in a preparation program that builds their skill set as well as their belief in their ability to be successful in the role.

The shortage of turnaround principals has gained national attention. The U.S. Department of Education revised its school improvement grant guidelines to allow principals in failing schools, who were hired as part of local improvement efforts within the last three years, to remain in the position (McLester, 2011). The previous policy allowed principals hired in the last two years to remain. The change in the school improvement grant guidelines was due to the shortage of turnaround principals. Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) argue that the problem is not simply a shortage of certified administrators, but a shortage of well-qualified administrators willing to take on schools in underserved communities where working conditions are the most challenging.

School leaders of low-performing schools face daunting challenges. Effective leaders must generate changes in behaviors of staff members that is considerably different than what staff members are accustomed to and move the teachers out of their comfort zones (Steiner &
Hassel, 2011). This type of deep organizational change requires a school leader with the skill and drive to stay the course. Perseverance is necessary because school leaders who have a successful track record in leading schools with high-need student populations consistently say they were unprepared for the severity of the student needs and school issues (Kutash et al., 2010). In *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) share the dangers in leading when drastic change is required:

To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear – their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking – with nothing more to offer perhaps than possibilities. People push back when you disturb the personal and institutional equilibrium they know. And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated. However gentle your style, however careful your strategy, however sure you may be that you are on the right track, leading is risky business. The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and, thus, the greater the danger to those who lead. (p. 2)

The role of a school leader in an average school can be a huge undertaking, the added pressures of reversing the course of a failing school requires individuals with deep leadership skill sets to be at the helm.

**Statement of the Problem**

Quality leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on improving student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Wahlstrom, Anderson, Mascall, & Gordon, 2009). Students
who attend low performing schools are at a disadvantage in realizing the American dream and in becoming productive citizens of society. Research continues to point to a student’s education level as a predictor of future earnings. Hanushek (2011) states that an effective teacher increases each student’s lifetime earnings by $10,600. He further states that given a class of 20 students, an effective teacher will raise aggregate earnings by $212,000. Consequently, a critical role of the principal is to hire, develop, and retain quality teachers to ensure student success.

Nevertheless, students continue to attend persistently low-performing schools that fail to provide them with a sound basic education. The report, *How Leadership Influences Learning*, states that leadership “provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives, and having those reforms make a genuine difference for all students” (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 19). New Leaders for New Schools (2009) stated, “Schools making breakthrough gains are led by principals who have carved out a radically new role for themselves, as well as implemented school-wide practices to impact both student achievement and teacher effectiveness” (p. 5).

NC is in a period of increasingly rigorous state standards and a changing accountability system. Low-performing schools, especially those in rural, high-poverty districts continue to struggle with recruiting and retaining effective principals and teachers. In their study Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) found that effective principals increase academic achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year.
Effective principals increase student achievement and improve the retention of effective teachers (Branch et al., 2013). In studies on teacher turnover, teachers commonly report that an ineffective principal is one of the key reasons for their leaving a school, or the profession completely (Jacob, Vidyarthi, & Carroll, 2012). In an average school, when a top teacher leaves, one in six of potential replacements will be of similar quality. However, in a low-performing school when a top teacher leaves only one in eleven potential replacements will be of similar quality (Jacob et al., 2012).

Retention of high quality teachers is an issue in low-performing schools. Nevertheless, skilled principals understand the need for succession planning. Faced with state and federal mandates to change the course of failing schools, a turnaround school is a prime candidate for planned discontinuity (Fullan, 2005). Most turnaround plans require replacing the school leader as the first step to interrupt the cycle of poor performance and redirect the school in a positive direction (Calkins et al., 2007). Leadership succession would be ideal to turning around a school; yet, this practice essentially does not exist in U.S. public education, despite the abundance of research showing quality leadership as a key factor to high performing schools (Coles & Southworth, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

In an August 2010 article in Education Week, Jerry D. Johnson, Research Director for the Rural School and Community Trust, stated, “Rural schools on average face higher concentrations of the challenges that make schools more difficult to staff than do their counterparts in other locales” (as quoted in Schulken, 2010, para. 5). Thus, having a pipeline of effective school leaders prepared to lead in this unique and challenging environment is key
to addressing principal succession in rural schools. However, typically a clearly thought out plan for establishing a principal pipeline is rarely seen in practice (Fullan, 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

In his State of the Union Address on January 27, 2010, President Barack Obama stated, “Instead of funding the status quo, we only invest in reform – reform that raises student achievement and turns around failing schools that steal the future of too many young Americans, from rural communities to the inner city” (Kutash et al., 2010).

Improving the performance of any school is difficult. It is especially challenging to implement and succeed in school turnaround at schools in rural areas (Kutash et al., 2010). Given their widely-dispersed geographies, rural schools struggle to recruit talent in low-performing schools located in high poverty communities (Schulken, 2010). Increasingly, money and attention are turning toward programs that hand-pick promising rural school leaders and equip them to thrive in a geographically isolated environment where resources are limited, poverty is high, and academic achievement is lagging (Schulken, 2010). NC State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy is one such program.

The purpose of this case study was two-fold: (a) to examine the impact of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on academic performance of students; and (b) to better understand the experiences, standards, and practices that NELA fellows attribute to the positive change in school performance. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the school performance over a three-year span prior to NELA graduates leading the schools?
2. What is the school performance while under the leadership of NELA graduates?
3. What experiences, standards, and practices do NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance, if there are any?

**Significance of the Study**

The principal, as the instructional leader, is held accountable for the success or failure of the school. Principals are expected to do more with less and in a short timeframe. This is especially true in the low-performing school districts in northeast NC. School performance was so consistently low that Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, a Wake County Superior Court judge presiding over *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, accused the failing schools in northeastern North Carolina of “academic genocide” (Silberman, 2006). In a letter dated March 3, 2006, addressed to then State Superintendent June Atkinson and State Board Chairman Howard Lee, Judge Manning recognized the importance of school leadership as a strategy to improve failing schools. He noted:

> Over the past months, after multiple discussions with leaders in education with proven records of success, I have come to the conclusion that the major problem with these schools lies within the category of school leadership, not money. There is a general consensus that the principal of any school is a critical component for success or failure of that school. The constitutional right of each child to an effective, competent and qualified principal requires that such a principal be in every school, including our high schools. That is the settled law in this case. Money is important, but competent, effective leadership is essential to success. (n.p.)
With the large concentration of low-performing schools in northeastern North Carolina it is imperative to have effective leaders prepared to “step up” and continue progress in the schools. That is exactly the role of NELA.

North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) is a school leadership preparation program designed to develop principals as instructional leaders to effectively address student achievement in northeast North Carolina’s rural, high-need schools. Since its inception in 2010, four cohorts of students have completed the NELA program, with an additional four cohorts in the program. Candidates of NELA go through a rigorous selection process in which they demonstrate their approach and potential to lead in a low-performing school. NELA requires participants to demonstrate their leadership skills through solving authentic school problems. The students make a three-year, post-degree commitment to work in high-need schools in northeast North Carolina. Program experiences are customized to focus on turnaround principles for rural, low performing, high-poverty schools and communities. Classes and trainings are held at sites in northeastern North Carolina.

The NELA program targets teacher leaders in northeastern North Carolina schools and prepares them to serve as turnaround principals. Each component of NELA is anchored in research-based best practices of leadership preparation. Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, NELA Director, stated, “Growing skilled rural school leaders from within permanently strengthens rural schools,” adding, “You can’t understand the complexities of the community from the outside; you can’t go in from the outside and ‘fix it.’ It won’t be sustainable; it won’t be authentic” (as quoted in Schulken, 2010, para. 16).
According to the NELA website, the NELA preparation program focuses on providing effective turnaround school leaders who are prepared to take on the challenge of low-performing rural schools. NELA’s innovative research-based approach to school preparation responds to the criticisms often cited of traditional principal preparation programs. Table 1.1 is from the NELA website and as the title explains, is NELA’s Response to Criticisms. The criticisms of traditional university preparation programs in the left column and NELA’s approach to the criticisms on the right.

Table 1.1: NELA’s Response to Criticism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>NELA</th>
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<td>Self-Nomination, minimal admission requirements</td>
<td>Rigorous Selection – candidates participate in</td>
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<tr>
<td>(e.g., GPAs and test scores)</td>
<td>performance-based assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course-Based with little to no integration</td>
<td>Standards-Driven, outcomes-based mastery. All elements of the program are aligned (NC Standards for School Executives)</td>
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<td>Preparation occurs after school, during the Night Shift</td>
<td>Preparation occurs during the Day Shift (in action of school day)</td>
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<td>Delivered on University Campus</td>
<td>Local Delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Topics</td>
<td>Turnaround, High-Need Schools Concepts</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Written Assignments Authentic</td>
<td>Problem Solving Experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internship During Teacher Prep Time</td>
<td>Extended Immersion in Multiple Contexts</td>
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<td>Too Many Theories and Too Many War Stories</td>
<td>Blended Faculty of Practitioner-Scholars</td>
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<td>Little Field-Based Support</td>
<td>Betted and Trained Mentors and Coaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sit and Get</td>
<td>Tell Me, Show Me, Grow Me Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone Ranger</td>
<td>Critical Mass of Turnaround Specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about Technology</td>
<td>Technology for Learning (reflection, data-based decision-making, efficiency, digital learning environments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools in Community</td>
<td>Schools as Community (including summer internship experience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That will never work here”</td>
<td>“Come see how it’s being done”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensure Only</td>
<td>Commitment to Serve High-Needs Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation = the end</td>
<td>Induction Support, Career-Spanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Learning (Pre-leadership Planning and Leadership PLC’s for leaders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Program Evaluation</td>
<td>Strategic Data Collection and Analysis Informing and Strengthening Preparation Programs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NELA 2.0 (Modified from: Briggs, Cheney, Davis & Moll, 2013).
**Delimitations of the Study**

NELA graduates serve in various leadership roles. This study includes only schools in which at the time of data collection, have program graduates working in the role of elementary school principal. Research emphasizes the role that a school leader plays in the improvement of students’ academic achievement. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), there are virtually no documented cases of school turnaround in the absence of a strong leader.

This was a qualitative study and included data for all NELA graduates serving in the role of elementary principal regardless of how long they have been at a particular school. According to Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Kowal, and Steiner (2006), it takes successful school turnaround leaders three or more years to experience school success and turnaround. However, the NELA preparation program is designed to develop principals as instructional leaders who can hit the ground running and impact student achievement while minimizing the effects of the first-year implementation dip.

The definition of school success in this study is limited to student performance on annual state standardized test. Ideally, to determine the success of a school, the researcher would include additional data points. An America Institute for Research report (2016) states: In addition to looking at student achievement as an outcome, additional proximal measures of principal effectiveness should be considered for evaluation. Examples of these are school climate, teacher retention, and principal and teacher effectiveness. Evidence of progress on these outcomes may occur sooner than effects on student
achievement, and they can help reveal a more complete picture of what is happening in a school. (p. 5)

In this study, the researcher sought to determine the impact of NELA-trained principals on student academic achievement in their schools. Thus, the researcher only included student results on state End-of Course (EOC) tests.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be defined to create a common understanding.

*ABC's of Public Education:* Focus on Accountability with an emphasis on high educational standards; teaching the Basics; and maximum local Control.

*Continually Low-Performing Schools:* A school that has received State-mandated assistance and has been designated by the State Board of Education as low performing for at least two of three consecutive years.

*Growth:* An indication of the rate at which students in the school learned over the past year. The standard is roughly equivalent to a year’s worth of growth for a year of instruction. Growth is reported for each school as Exceeded Growth Expectations, Met Growth Expectations, or Did Not Meet Growth Expectations.

*Inter-State Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC):* A list of six standards for school leaders.

*North Carolina Department of Public Instruction:* The state education agency of North Carolina that provides resources and technical support to public schools in North Carolina.
North Carolina Standards for School Executive (NCSSE): The six standards for school administrator performance and evaluation based on the ISLLC standards.

Leandro vs. the State of North Carolina: A case that involved five low-wealth counties (Cumberland, Halifax, Hoke, Robeson, and Vance) against the State Board of Education and the State of North Carolina. The counties argue that the State did not provide enough financial means for them to provide their children with a “sound basic education” as guaranteed by the State constitution.

Local Education Agencies (LEA): The 115 Local Education Agencies in North Carolina defined mostly by county and city lines.

Low-performing: A school with a performance composite score of below 50% proficient as measured by state standardized test and a growth status of “not met” as defined by the State Board of Education.

READY Accountability Model: North Carolina's accountability model implemented, formerly known as the ABC's. The READY program sets growth and performance standards for each elementary, middle, and high school in the state.

Rural North Carolina: Counties with a population density of fewer than 200 people per square mile.

Performance Composite: The percentage of the student test scores in the school that are at Achievement Level 3 or 4, which is considered grade-level proficiency or above.

Title 1 School: Schools identified as Title I have a large concentration of low-income students. For a school to qualify for Title 1 funds, at least 40% of students must be enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. The schools identified as Title I are part of the federal
program that provides funding for high poverty schools to help students who are behind academically or at risk of falling behind.

*Turnaround:* A change in a school’s performance to above 60% proficient as measured by its performance composite scores on state standardized test to above 60% proficient.

**Chapter Summary**

There are pressures of high expectations around student accountability placed on school leaders in turnaround schools. Research shows that effective school leadership is the key to improving failing schools. However, at a time where quality school leaders are in high demand, such leaders are in short supply.

Chapter 1 provided an introduction of the need for principal preparation programs to develop school leaders that are prepared to take on the challenges of low-performing schools. Chapter 2 contains the review of literature to support the purpose of this study. Chapter 3 describes the methods, data collection, and data analysis that will be used to conduct this study. Chapter 4 details the data analysis and findings of the research. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, conclusions, and implications for program reform, policy, and further study.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

It is recognized that the role of a school leader is challenging in a well-functioning, high performing school. The challenge becomes greater and more urgent in a school that is persistently low-performing and located in a geographical location where resources, both human and financial, are limited.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the research to inform this study of the impact of North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on academic performance of students. This chapter is divided into eight components; (a) evolution of school leadership, (b) development of principal preparation, (c) importance of school leadership, (d) shortage of school principals, (e) rural versus urban, (f) reform leader preparation, (g) North Carolina’s approach to developing a principal pipeline, and (h) Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA). Interest in this area of research has increased in light of the number of low-performing schools located in northeastern North Carolina and the limited number of quality school leaders prepared and willing to serve these schools.

Evolution of School Leadership

Early schools were one-room structures with a single teacher, or master, who was accountable to the local community for what went on in his classroom (Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2013). There were virtually no local or state standards to follow, so school leaders had the freedom to develop and institute their own vision.

In the 1800s, schooling took place in rural areas and was guided by religious values (Pierce, 1935). Schools were locally created and controlled by lay people with a Protestant-
republican ideology. Principals were typically represented as teachers with administrative responsibilities. The “principal teachers” were expected to function as guardians and promoters of accepted values and cultural norms (Campbell et al., 1987; Tyack & Hansot, 1994).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the primary attention of the principal was realigned from the classroom to a central administrative structure (Rousmaniere, 2013). As cities grew, schools moved to a structure of separating students by grade levels based on academic proficiency and age (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Individual teachers taught students in self-contained classrooms. Principals carried out some clerical and administrative duties that kept the school in order, such as assigning classes, enforcing discipline, maintaining the building, taking attendance, and ensuring that school began and ended on time. These duties brought the principal teacher a degree of authority. Over time, the principal teacher eventually lost teaching responsibilities and became primarily a manager, administrator, supervisor, instructional leader, and increasingly a politician (Brown, 2005; Cuban, 1996; Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2013). The title of “principal” evolved from principal teacher during the turn of the 20th century (Pierce, 1935).

In the early twentieth century, during the time of the Great Depression, America transformed from a rural agricultural society into an urban industrialized nation. The language of reform moved slowly from that of Protestant-republican ideology to that of science and business efficiency (Pierce, 1935). Principals were expected to link their schools with spiritual and social values and with principals of scientific management (Beck &
There was a shift from principals as spiritual leaders to principals as business managers or “school executives.”

The period between the 1950s and 1980s represents a time of social justice and progression. The 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education influenced the shift of education to equity and accountability for all students. The 1950s represent years of great change for the role of principals in the United States (Beck & Murphy, 1993). During this decade, principals had two distinct roles, one role was based in the theoretical aspect of the work and one based in the organizational side. Principals were viewed as professional administrators who used research-based learning strategies to improve student outcomes. Per Beck and Murphy (1993), principals were expected to know and apply highly objective laws and principles that organizational and administrative science was discovering and be “overseers” of minute details of school management.

Administration in the 1960s was portrayed as a “highly impersonal activity” (Beck & Murphy, 1993, p. 114). The principalship was viewed as a job that could be learned. Amidst the social unrest and complex social problems of that decade, the role of principal was expanded to include an emphasis on concrete ways to improve the quality and level of production. The 1970s presented a shift to principals being guided by a concern for the overall well-being of individuals and their communities (Beck & Murphy, 1993). The shift included a focus on principals upholding moral and cultural values. Toward the 1980s more programs and initiatives were being implemented. This was the decade of educational reform. The role of principal focused more on organizational management. Principals were
expected to serve as instructional leaders, and in doing so, becoming responsible for guiding teachers and students toward productive learning outcomes.

Leading a school requires a complex array of skills (Marzano et al., 2005). In an accountability driven era, the principal role has become more challenging and demanding. This is evident in the unsurmountable literature and research on approaches to school leadership. For instance, Marzano et al. (2005) identified 21 leadership responsibilities that have a significant effect on student achievement. Similarly, Fullan (2005) shares the integration of five core competencies to empower leaders to deal with complex change, while Heifetz and Linsky (2002) discuss the dangers of leading and the importance of leaders having the ability to determine if an adaptive change is occurring so they can adapt their strategy of approach. In addition, Cheney and Davis (2011) share New Leaders for New Schools, six principal effectiveness domains, and the list of comparable research continues.

Fink (2004) argues that the changing role and pressures from outside influences on the principalship may discourage many from taking on the challenge of leading a school, stating:

Leadership in recent years has become a growth industry. Politicians demand more of it, academics decry the lack of it, and potential school leaders are deciding ‘to hell with it’. I would submit that we are making the business of leadership so complicated that we seem to need either John Wayne at his mythological best or Xena: Warrior Princess of television fame to run a school. (p. 2)
With such demands placed upon principals, attention has turned to how principals are being prepared to lead in such challenging situations. Some argue that principal preparation programs are preparing principals for the schools of yesterday (Hess & Kelly, 2005).

Development of Principal Preparation Programs

In the early history of American schools, there are few documented records about training for school administrators. While there is an abundance of historical information on the evolving role of the principal, there is far less historical documentation for principal preparation. According to Pierce (1935), during the period 1895-1910, the role of the principalship was well established except in a few cases. Principals did little to study their work. Most principals were satisfied with attending to clerical tasks and petty routines.

Levine (2005) notes that the first college-level course in the field was taught between 1879 and 1881, and writes:

From 1890 to 1910, courses in administration were transformed into full-blown graduate degree programs in response to the enormous expansion of the public schools. Fueled by the success of the high school, where enrollments nearly quadrupled and teachers almost quintupled during this period, graduate education for school administrators took off. (p. 15)

The development of the modern principalship occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. The principal preparation programs were based on the industry or factory model. In the mid-twentieth century, the Department of Elementary School Principals recognized the need to provide more effective preparation for principals as well as effective procedures for
recruitment of candidates into principal preparation programs. Beck and Murphy (1993) quote the Department of Elementary School Principal:

Discover and improve procedures for finding and preparing those who will provide the kind of educational leadership so urgently needed. Those involved in these meetings, although they decried the condition of most preparation programs, did not deny the importance of administrative training. (p. 70)

In other words, there was disagreement with how principals were being prepared, but an understanding that principal preparation was needed (Beck & Murphy, 1993).

**Critics of Principal Preparation Programs**

Principals play a vital role in the success of schools, but existing knowledge on the best ways to prepare and develop effective candidates is sparse. The role of principal has changed dramatically. Unfortunately, principal preparation programs have not kept up with the new demands and challenges of leading a school. According to Levine (2005), the traditional university-based Master’s program that prepares the majority of principals is, at best, inadequate and appalling. In a Public Agenda survey, Petzko (2008) found that 69% of principals participating said that their preparation was out of touch with the realities of leading a school.

Hess and Kelly’s (2005) study of principal preparation programs found that 30% of course material focused on operational issues, 16% focused on managing for results, 15% focused on managing personnel, and 12% focused on norms and values. Levine (2005) argued that principal preparation programs have irrelevant curriculum, low admission and graduation standards, weak faculty, inadequate clinical instruction, inappropriate degrees,
and poor research. Together, this research suggests there is little evidence that principal-preparation programs are designed in ways to introduce students to in-depth knowledge and a broad range of areas needed to be successful in the role (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine 2005).

Hess and Kelly (2005) also found that principal preparation programs have not kept pace with the challenges of schools of today. This dilemma leaves principals ill-equipped to take on the complexities and accountability placed upon them as school leaders. According to a Public Agenda Survey (as cited in Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), more than 60% of the participants stated that leadership preparation programs are out of touch with the realities of leading a school. Levine (2005) described the quality of most university-based preparation programs as appalling. While more than a decade has passed since these seminal commentaries, not much has changed in traditional preparation programs.

Components of Effective Principal Preparation Programs

While there is limited research on the effectiveness of school leadership preparation programs, there are programs that show promise. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) identified innovative principal preparation program features that yielded better graduate perceptions of their training and stronger school leadership outcomes. The innovative program features identified include:

- Clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized
- Standards-based curriculum emphasizing instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management
- Field-based internships with skilled supervision
• Cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork in practice-oriented situations; active instructional strategies that link theory and practice, such as problem-based learning

• Rigorous recruitment and selection of both candidates and faculty

• Strong partnerships with schools and districts to support quality, field-based learning. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007)

In some instances, states take on the role of serving as the impetus for improving leadership development. For example, Illinois embarked on principal preparation reform in 2001. As of June 2014, all principal preparation programs were required to meet new requirements to continue operating. The new requirements required Illinois’ principal preparation programs to:

• Include partnerships with school districts in preparation program design and delivery

• Meet the Educational Leadership Policy Standards outlined by ISLLC

• Offer curricula that address student learning and school improvement and focus on:
  
  o Learning at all grade levels (pre-K through Grade 12)
  
  o Role of instruction, curriculum, assessment, and needs of the school or district in improving learning

  o Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (Standards for All Illinois Teachers, 2015)

  o Learning needs of all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, and students in early childhood programs

  o Collaborative relationships with all members of the school community
• Include a performance-based internship that enables the candidate to be exposed to and to participate in a variety of school leadership situations in settings that represent diverse economic and cultural conditions and involve interaction with various members of the school community

• Admit candidates who meet specified minimum requirements and are selected through an in-person interview process

• Provide collaborative support for candidates from both faculty and mentor principals (Klostermann, Pareja, Hart, White, & Huynh, 2015).

Around this same time, philanthropic organizations like the Wallace Foundation has been engaged in commissioning research on school leaders for more than 10 years. The foundation’s focus on this work has resulted in a myriad of research that has guided principal preparation programs, school districts, and states in their work to transform both the role and the effectiveness of school leaders. In August and September 2015, the Wallace Foundation, along with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the School Superintendents Association (AASA), the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) (Mendels, 2016) commissioned four reports. From the synthesis of the four reports, five themes emerged:

• District leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs, and many universities believe that their programs have room for improvement.

• Strong university-district partnerships are essential to high-quality preparation but are far from universal.
• The course of study at preparation programs does not always reflect principals’ real jobs.

• Some university policies and practices can hinder change.

• States have authority to play a role in improving principal preparation, but many are not using this power as effectively as possible. (Mendels, 2016)

The focus on effective components of principal preparation has increased over the last decade. Many educators in both universities and school district leadership, believe that principal preparation programs need to change—and many programs show an openness to doing just that (Mendels, 2016, p. 7).

**Importance of School Leadership**

Rousmaniere (2013) argues that as the principalship evolved away from the classroom to the administrative office, the principal became less connected with student learning, and yet more responsible for it (p. 5). Leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their students. Effective principal impacts both student achievement and teacher effectiveness. According to Linda Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), school administrators must be educational visionaries and change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders. Schools are expected to successfully teach all students regardless of the need while continuing to improve student achievement. Schools must be redesigned rather than merely administered.
In a review of research, Leithwood et al. (2009) found that leadership is second only to teachers in its impact on student achievement, and leadership effects are greatest when needed the most. Figure 2.1 illustrates the percent of impact a principal has on student achievement. Although the impact is indirect, the effects are great.

![Pie chart showing the percent of impact on student achievement: Teacher Impact 33%, Principal Impact 25%, Other 42%]

**Figure 2.1: Principal Impact on Student Achievement**

The impact of effective leadership is largest when it is needed most. As stated previously, there are practically no documented cases of school turnaround in the absence of intervention by an effective leader (Leithwood et al., 2004). A 2003 Public Agenda survey of administrators found that 63% of superintendents cited raising student achievement as the biggest part of a principal’s evaluation. In addition, 47% have moved a successful principal to a low-performing school to help it improve (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003).
School leadership makes a difference in improving learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005). Darling-Hammond states that while our children do learn, not all of them are learning as much or as well as we want and need them to meet the demands of today’s society (as cited in DeVita et al., 2007). School leaders are uniquely positioned to ensure students are receiving the education they need to thrive (DeVita et al., 2007).

**Shortage of School Principals**

A school leadership research study conducted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) found that in most parts of the country, the problem was not a shortage of certified administrators, but a shortage of well qualified administrators who were willing to work in the places of highest demand, such as underserved communities and schools where working conditions are most challenging. They go on to state that the quality of the preparation experience appears to be related to the willingness of potential candidates to take on this tough job, as well as their ability to survive and succeed in it.

**Rural Versus Urban**

While improving the performance of any school is difficult, it is particularly challenging to succeed in school turnaround at schools in rural areas (Kutash et al., 2010). Almost one-third of America’s schools are rural, and nearly one-half of North Carolina’s students attend rural schools. Of the 2,588 North Carolina schools, 1,409 are in rural areas. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in school year 2012–2013, approximately 49.8 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools. Over 40% of the nation’s total public school enrollment was found in rural school
districts. Rural schools serve one out of five students in the United States and account for an estimated one-third of the roughly 5,000 schools nationwide targeted for improvement (Miller & Hansen, 2010). Goldring and Taie (2014) found that principals in rural schools are less apt to stay in the profession than those in suburban or city schools. In rural low-achieving districts, there are typically insufficient numbers of high-achieving schools and highly effective staff. Districts have to recruit from the outside, but it is often difficult to attract people to relocate to economically-distressed rural areas.

**Reform Leader Preparation**

According to Briggs, Cheney, Davis, and Moll’s (2013) study, there are 978 principal preparation programs in operation across the country. The study further states that principal preparation programs are designed to ensure that aspiring principals develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for job success. However, many preparation programs reflect out-of-date notions of the principal role (Briggs et al., 2013). According to Manna (2015), state leaders have both “formal and informal powers” to ensure schools have excellent principals. Cooper, Fusarelli, and Radall (2004) state:

> Amidst all the talk of education reform and change, we need to examine more closely the issues and intricacies of policy implementation in education. After all, educational reform and change are impossible if policies are not implemented properly. (p. 84)

The Obama administration elevated the importance of developing a pipeline of effective leaders. The federal $4.35 billion RttT grant program encouraged states to provide high-quality pathways for aspiring principals. States had the authority to address policy areas that can result in developing a pipeline of effective school leaders. According to Grossman
(2011), there are several policy levers that states can use to impact the quality of preparation programs, thus impacting the quality of schools.

One policy lever is how principals receive certification. Grossman (2011) proposes that states adopt policies that require teachers who want to pursue a master’s degree in administration to first secure an endorsement from the school district. An ideal candidate should exhibit the qualities of an aspiring school leader who has what it takes to improve schools and student outcomes (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010). The endorsement should be based on the district’s belief that the person has the potential to be an effective school leader. Traditionally, many principal preparation programs have overlooked recruiting as an important step in the development of principals (Cheney et al., 2010).

Another policy lever includes demanding more from school leader preparation programs. Grossman (2011) suggests preparation programs could be improved through partnerships with school districts to ensure the preparation program meets the needs of the modern school. This sentiment is echoed in much of the work done by the Wallace Foundation.

Regarding the third policy lever, teachers who have a Master’s degree in school leadership but have chosen not to serve in the principal role should not receive Master’s pay. Grossman (2011) recommends to reverse policies that require teachers to be paid on a “step and lane” salary schedule. In addition, she suggests that compensation models that do not provide additional pay for advanced degrees could bring about cost savings for school districts and states.
States have several powerful policy and regulatory levers at their disposal (Briggs et al., 2013; Grossman, 2011; Manna, 2015). States approve principal preparation programs to train future leaders, require that public school leaders be licensed, and collect and monitor data to determine whether principals are effective once on the job (Briggs et al., 2013). Manna (2015) identifies six policy levers states have at their disposal to ensure schools have excellent principals, which are aligned with the policy levers identified by Grossman (2011). Two of the six policy levers identified by Manna (2015) speak directly to principal preparation program reform. Policy Lever One is setting principal leadership standards. Manna (2015) recommends states adopt principal leadership standards into state law and regulation and use the standards to foster coherence across policies and initiative aimed at cultivating and supporting excellent principals.

Policy Lever Two is recruiting aspiring principals into the profession. Manna (2015) recommends states facilitate coordination between local school districts and preparation programs in the recruitment of aspiring principals. He also recommends states alter incentives to increase the chances that people who seek principal certification actually intend to become principals. Manna (2015) suggests states support special institutes, including leadership academies, to identify potentially talented principals, usher them into the profession, and support them on the job. He further suggests, states policy makers forecast future trends in anticipated principal vacancies to help direct recruitment toward meeting specific state needs (Manna, 2015).
Based on the review of the literature, states have policy levers they can pull to push principal preparation reform. However, many states are not using their authority to improve the supply of high quality principals for their schools.

**North Carolina’s Approach to Developing a Principal Pipeline**

Developing school leaders who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to effectively lead low-performing schools has become a critical goal for local education agencies and states. In 2010, North Carolina earned one of 12 RttT grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. North Carolina’s RttT plan acknowledged the pressing need for high-quality leadership in low-achieving schools. The grant application stated:

In 2009, there were 60 new principals via direct licensure (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) licensure database), but only 9 candidates were enrolled in the state’s only Innovative and Experimental Program for School Administrators. In 2009-10, nearly 1 in 4 principals (22%) were new to the schools they were leading. Forty percent or more indicated PD needs in the areas of student assessment, teacher evaluation, teacher remediation, and data-driven decision-making, all of which are critical components of the State’s RttT plans and the State Board’s priorities. Professional development in instructional leadership was not far behind, with over one-third (36%) requesting additional PD in this critical area.

The policy objective of North Carolina’s Regional Leadership Academies (RLA) initiative was to increase the number of principals qualified to lead transformational change in low-performing, high-need schools in both rural and urban areas. These programs provided a new
model for the preparation, early career support, and continuous professional development of school leaders. The programs served partnering Local Education Agency (LEA) collaboratives.

The Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) based at North Carolina State University, was established one year prior to RttT funding being available, but was included in NC’s RttT proposal as a pilot program worthy of expansion and replication. NELA was established in 2010 as a two-year program. The program leads to North Carolina Principal Licensure and a Masters of School Administration (MSA) degree. The Piedmont Triad Leadership Academy, based at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, was established in 2010 as a one-year program. That program led to North Carolina Principal Licensure and 24 graduate-level credits. The Sandhills Leadership Academy, founded by the Sandhills Regional Education Consortium, was established in 2010 as a one-year program. This initiative led to North Carolina Principal Licensure and 18 graduate-level credits at UNC-Pembroke or Fayetteville State University. Each of the RLAs was created independently to meet the school leadership needs of three regions of North Carolina.

**Northeast Leadership Academy**

NELA is a nationally recognized innovative research-based preparation program. The ground work for NELA began in 2009 from a planning grant. NELA was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The task was to design a principal preparation program that would create a pipeline of effective principals ready to lead rural, low-performing schools in northeast North Carolina. NELA established a partnership with 14 local school districts that are geographically located in the
NELA prepares school leaders for low-performing, hard-to-staff schools located in rural northeast North Carolina. NELA’s approach to principal preparation is uniquely different than that of traditional principal preparation programs. The NELA design is a two-year funded cohort program. Candidates receive a Master’s degree as well as school leadership
credentials. NELA grounds its work in the following research-based principles (NELA’s Application for UCEA Award, 2011). Effective principals:

a. Lead by modeling exemplar values and behavior

b. Help make possible what they require others to do

c. Establish agreement on the school’s purpose and goals and then create processes that help employees learn what they need to meet these goals

d. Select, reward, and retain teachers/staff who are willing to work to achieve school goals

e. Are leaders of learning in the school (there is a laser-like focus on academic achievement and all decisions and resources are aligned to the goal of improving student outcomes) and establishes a sense of urgency

f. Develop the staff and cultivate a culture of continuous, reflective professional learning (by both individuals and groups/PLCs) that is transparent and a collective good

g. Cultivate shared leadership so that authority and accountability are linked

h. Are systems-thinkers and are able to frame problems and potential problems by being reflective practitioners

i. Utilize a systems level understanding of the interconnectedness of barriers to student achievement and are able to identify leverage points within the system to push change efforts that improve school outcomes

j. Understand, read, predict, and prevent challenges to a positive school climate

k. Use multiple forms of data to inform all decisions
1. Understand that a central aim of their work is creation of a socially just school organization and student learning process so that all students can be academically successful.

NELA has an intensive, highly-selective cohort model. Figure 2.3 below provides a visual of the multi-step selection process utilized by NELA to identify potential fellows. The intake process includes a daylong candidate assessment day. Potential candidates who emerge from the application process participate in experiential events where they must demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and disposition. All candidates for the NELA program, must be endorsed by both their supervising principal and their district’s superintendent.

![Figure 2.3 NELA Intake Process from Application to Admissions](image)

NELA has a unique way of looking at the North Carolina Standards for School Executives. Table 2.1: NELA Competencies for Leadership, displays NELA’s approach to the North Carolina competencies for school leadership through the unique mission of NELA.
Table 2.1: NELA Competencies for Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Urgency</td>
<td>Demonstrates a passion and energy that drives them to action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asset Thinker (as opposed to deficit thinking)</td>
<td>Believes in building on strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart-driven</td>
<td>Demonstrates a genuine appreciation, respect, and LOVE for all people in the communities in which they work – especially rural, high-need communities. Translates to seeking the best for students/families/communities and holding them to high expectations. Whole child focused. Culturally inclusive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable navigating uncertainty</td>
<td>Understands that at times leaders need to act with incomplete data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth-mindset</td>
<td>For themselves and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent Thinker/Creative</td>
<td>Solutions generator. Sees possibilities and creatively designs solutions to complex, inter-related problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Mission &amp; Hope</td>
<td>Demonstrates/Communicates a commitment to being a positive change agent in education and that they will work to overcome any barriers to accomplishing their mission. Is willing to invest a significant amount of time to earn their MSA. Hope: Demonstrates a hopeful vision for a better future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Model</td>
<td>Sets a positive example as a role model through appearance and consistent ethical behavior (fairness, honesty, trust, and respect for others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy/Happy</td>
<td>Demonstrates a sense of joy (personal satisfaction) in their work/life and a desire to lead schools with healthy, happy, school cultures. Enjoys seeing youth development and growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Listener/Rapport Builder</td>
<td>Listens and builds rapport with others. Wins the confidence of staff, parents, youth, and the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Accountability</td>
<td>Demonstrates an understanding of their role in problems and holds self-accountable for outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NELA combines coursework with supervised residency internship experiences. There is intentional effort to connect to the local community. According to the NELA website and a 2014 presentation by Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, participants of NELA demonstrate their leadership skills through solving authentic school problems with the support of executive coaches. NELA teaches participants powerful mindsets and skill sets that have the potential...
to change the trajectory of historically low-performing schools. Program experiences are customized to focus on turnaround principles for rural, low performing, high-poverty schools and communities. Classes and trainings are held at sites in northeastern North Carolina.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this case study was two-fold: (a) to examine the impact of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on academic performance of students; and (b) to better understand the experiences, standards, and practices NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance.

The goal of NELA is to prepare NELA fellows to become leaders in rural, high-need schools in northeastern North Carolina. The fellows are trained as turnaround leaders with the skills needed to bring about deep change in low-performing schools to drive improvement in student performance (Fusarelli, 2009). This study examined if there is a change in school performance under the leadership of NELA graduates. In addition, this study investigated the experiences of NELA graduates from their perspectives to gain a deeper understanding as to what they attribute the change in school performance. Further, this study provided an interpretation and explanation of the change in school performance and NELA graduates perspectives to gain an overarching understanding of the experiences, standards, and practices of NELA graduates that improve academic performance of students in rural high-needs districts.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the school performance over a three-year span prior to NELA graduates leading the schools?
2. What is the school performance while under the leadership of NELA graduates?
3. What experiences, standards, and practices do NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance, if there are any?
**Research Design**

Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (p. 37). A qualitative approach to inquiry allows the researcher to collect data in the natural setting of the people and places under study (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as:

… a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that the qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (p. 3)

The researcher for this study was interested in understanding how NELA-trained principals interpret their experiences, structure their worlds, and attribute meaning to their experiences (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gay et al., 2009; Merriam et al., 2016). Interviews with NELA-trained principals were done to collect the qualitative data. Data was collected through qualitative methods such as interviews involves direct interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to understand the context in which participants in a study address a problem (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell (2007)
states, “To level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies” (p. 40). The use of qualitative research as a follow-up to examining quantitative data, allowed the researcher in this study to add a deeper understanding to the phenomenon, and to help explain the linkage between the change in school performance to the experiences, standards, and practices NELA graduates attribute to the change (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the qualitative approach was ideal for this research study.

**Case Study**

Case study research is used to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, develop explanations of it, and evaluate a phenomenon (Gall et al., 2007). The qualitative method involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2009) defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Case studies deal with a full variety of evidence (Yin, 2009). A qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs and in its particular situation (Stake, 2006). This method of qualitative study is ideal when the relevant behaviors can’t be manipulated (Yin, 2009). This makes case study design ideal for this research study.

**Multiple-Case/Collective Case Study**

In a collective or multiple-case study, the researcher selects multiple case studies to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomenon. According to Stake (2006), multiple-case studies consist of a collection of cases where the single case is of significance because each
case shares a mutual quality or condition. Each individual case, in its natural setting, brings more insight to the phenomenon (Stake, 2006). Yin (2009) suggests that the multiple-case design uses the logic of replication where the procedures are replicated for each case. A qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs and in its particular situation (Stake, 2006). Stake (2006) states, “One of the most important tasks for the multi-case researcher is to show how the program or phenomenon appears in different contexts” (p. 27). This made the multiple-case design ideal for the current research study.

**Site Selection and Participants**

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) described purposeful sampling as a researcher’s intentional selection of individuals and sites for a study who have experienced the phenomenon and who can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and phenomenon in the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 96). This study used purposeful sampling to seek out participants who are graduates of the NELA program and who serve as the primary instructional leaders in their buildings (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2006).

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state, “What is needed is an adequate number of participants, sites, or activities to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study” (p. 101). Creswell (2007) suggests, the researcher should study no more than four or five cases to collect extensive detail about each site or individual. Stake (2006) proposes:
The benefits of multi-case study will be limited if fewer than, say, 4 cases are chosen, or more than 10. Two or three cases do not show enough of the interactivity between programs and their situations, whereas 15 or 30 cases provided more uniqueness of interactivity than the research team and readers can come to understand. (p. 22)

The first cohort of NELA-trained principals graduated in 2012. At the time of this study, 59 NELA-trained principals had graduated from the program (Cohort One: 19, Cohort Two: 20, Cohort Three: 20). The researcher identified 14 NELA-trained principals serving in the role of principal (eight elementary, three middle, one high school, and one early college high school). Based on the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2015), Creswell (2007), and Stake (2006), the researcher presented eight elementary cases for this study to ensure an adequate number of participants, sites, and activities to answer the research questions.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Creswell (2007) states, “The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through… interviewing participants (p. 38). Gay et al. (2009) state, “The researcher is the primary data collection instrument.” The researcher for this study used in-depth, open-ended questions during a semi-structured interview for data collection and analysis. The researcher and the researcher’s dissertation chair work with the NELA program. The researcher will discuss how she controlled for bias in the researcher subjectivity section.
School Performance

Gall et al. (2007) state that “unless researchers first generate an accurate description of an educational phenomenon as it exists, they lack a firm basis for explaining or changing it” (p. 310). This study generated a description of school performance in schools led by NELA graduates. Performance composite scores and school growth designation were used to determine change in school performance. The data for student academic performance of this study was collected using existing data that is public. The researcher collected descriptive information of student achievement data through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) Accountability public website from the North Carolina School Report Card.

The schools’ performance composite and growth designation were collected for the years 2010 to 2015. The research questions were examined in the following manner:

- **Research Question 1.** The researcher reviewed the school performance composite score and growth designation to determine school performance during the three-year span prior to the NELA graduates leading the schools.

- **Research Question 2.** The researcher reviewed the school performance composite score and growth designation to determine school performance while under the leadership of NELA graduates.

Effective with the 2012-2013 school year, the State Board of Education adopted the READY Accountability Model. North Carolina provided a data set of district and school level data used in the READY Accountability model on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website. The data set contained information on all accountability model indicators.
for 2012-2013 and beyond. The data sets from prior years contained only End-of-Grade (EOG) and End-of-Course (EOC) data. Data were collected for the three-year span prior to the NELA graduates leading the schools and for the years while under the leadership of NELA graduates.

Experiences and Practices of School Leaders

As described by Patton (2015), qualitative data obtained through interviews consist of “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinion, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 14). In phenomenological research, data are collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, primarily through in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007). As Patton (2015) explains:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe… We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective. (p. 426)

According to Gall et al. (2007), “The major advantage of interviews is their adaptability. Skilled interviewers make an effort to build trust and rapport with respondents, thus making it possible to obtain information that the individual probably would not reveal by any other data-collection method” (p. 228). Interviews are characterized by their degree of formality and structure (Gay et al., 2009). The current study used a semi-structured interview protocol.
that involves the researcher asking a series of structured questions along with follow-up, open-form questions to obtain information (Gall et al., 2007). The descriptive data obtained from opened-ended and follow-up questions allowed the researcher to attain information on the experiences, standards, and practices of NELA graduates that improve academic performance of students in rural high-needs districts.

In-Person Interviews

The researcher for this study conducted “in-person question-and-answer sessions” (Gay et al., 2009, p. 177) with NELA graduates. Yin (2009) noted that, to address reliability in a qualitative study, one should “make as many steps as operational as possible and… conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 45). This study will follow a semi-structured protocol as outlined below:

1. The researcher invited the participants to the study through email correspondence. The email correspondence was sent from a North Carolina State University Gmail account to the participants’ professional email address.

2. The email provided informed consent.

3. Interviews were scheduled with each participant.

4. Participants were not given a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview.

5. The researcher interviewed each participant one time, at the principal’s school site. Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview. The researcher and the principal were the only two individuals present during the interview process.

6. Follow-up questions were asked during the interview and through email.
7. The interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes for each of the participants.

8. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

9. Participants were given an opportunity to review the transcription of the completed interviews.

10. The researcher coded the data for emergent themes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research begins from the initial interaction with participants and continues throughout the entire study (Gay et al., 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, each participant’s interview was transcribed within 48 hours of the interview. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state, “Data analysis is a complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 202). The analysis process involved rereading the transcriptions and comparing the responses of all the participants until no new information was obtained; Morse (1995) defines the process as data saturation, and warns that failure to achieve saturation severely impedes the quality of the research.

This study provided an interpretation and explanation of change in student achievement data and NELA-trained principals’ perspective to gain an overarching understanding of the experiences, standards, and practices of NELA graduates that improve academic performance of students in rural high-needs districts.
Research Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers work with their own and others’ impressions. Stake (2006) proposes that good researchers want assurance that the meaning gained by the reader is the meaning the researcher intended to convey. In qualitative research, validity addresses “the degree to which qualitative data accurately gauge what we are trying to measure” (Gay et al., 2009, p. 375). Trustworthiness and understanding are common terms used to describe validity in qualitative research. Reliability, however, is the degree to which the study data consistently measure what they intend to measure (Gay et al., 2009). In a qualitative study, the researcher is looking for confirmability rather than objectivity to address the issue of reliability (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) states, “Confirmability requires the researcher to confirm results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 204).

The purpose of qualitative research is to translate the ideas that surface into practice as strategies (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, it is important to employ a research design that accurately depicts the lived experiences of study participants. The current study addressed trustworthiness by employing triangulation. Triangulation is described as the use of multiple data sources to provide corroborating evidences from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007). Stake (2006) described triangulation as having at least three confirmations and assurances that key meanings are not being overlooked. The research study involved eight elementary principals and data from various sources to validate the findings.
Researcher Subjectivity

The researcher for this study had more than 24 years of experience in education, with seven years of experience working in northeastern North Carolina, at the time of the current study. The researcher is keenly aware of the challenges faced by school leaders in rural, high-needs schools. From February 2008 to July 2015, the researcher worked for the turnaround division of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. One of the researcher’s responsibilities has been in supervising coaches for school principals. The primary role of a principal coach was providing coaching support for school leaders in low-performing schools located in northeastern North Carolina. The researcher for this study has 16 years combined experience as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and area superintendent. As an area superintendent, the researcher has experience in the development and evaluation of principals.

The researcher and the researcher’s dissertation chair are both closely connected with the NELA program. The researcher worked with NELA as a project director and executive coach and the researcher’s dissertation chair envisioned and designed NELA and she is the Director of NELA. The close connection of the researcher and the dissertation chair to the NELA program could possibly skew their view on the impact of the NELA program. Given the close relationship between the researcher and research topic, the bracketing method was used to “mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). Creswell and Miller (2000) note the importance of researchers acknowledging their beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions,
and then ‘bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds’ (p. 127).

Moustakas (1994) defines bracketing as the process of data analysis in which the researcher sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of participants in the study.

The researcher also attempted to utilize the process of member checking to ensure the researcher is accurately reporting the experiences of the participants. Stake (2006) states, “When knowledge is being constructed, no two observers construct it exactly the same way” (p. 37), making member checking a vital technique for field researchers. The researcher asked interviewees to read the report for accuracy and possible misrepresentation (Stake, 2006). Member checks allow for “revision and improved interpretation of the reporting” (Stake, 2006, p. 37). However, in this study, none of the participants engaged in the member check process. Therefore, all data is presented as originally captured by the researcher.

**Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study was a lack of generalizability. Yin (2009) states case studies are generalized to theoretical propositions and not to populations. The number of candidates graduating from NELA is far smaller than most traditional programs due to the rigorous recruitment and selection process. Candidates for NELA are recommended by the district superintendent and given the option to apply. NELA selects candidates based on their potential to positively impact student achievement in low-performing schools as demonstrated by their performance in assessment activities. This study included eight elementary principals who are graduates of NELA, thus the results may not be generalizable.
Second, the study focused on school leadership in low-performing high-needs schools in northeastern North Carolina. The specificity of the geographical location may not lend itself to the results being transferable to non-rural schools or schools in other states, since the accountability polices, standards for learning, and standards for school administrators are different.

Finally, the study focused on nontraditional preparation for the principalship. There are stark differences between NELA’s approach to principal preparation and traditional principal preparation programs – including the traditional program offered at NC State. NELA addresses the areas that critics of traditional programs state need to shift to ensure school leaders are prepared to take on the challenges of the neediest schools. The uniqueness of the NELA curriculum may not lend itself to the results being transferable to traditional preparation programs.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 outlined the methods used to conduct this qualitative study. This chapter included the design, sampling, data collections, and data analysis process. In the current study, the researcher used interviews to gather data from a purposeful sampling of eight NELA graduates.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter will briefly revisit the purpose of the study and then address the research questions, through a discussion of the findings. The discussion includes background data for each school, a snapshot of participant profiles and their perceptions of their experiences and practices that directly impact student academic achievement in their schools. Further, this chapter presents an analysis of the data and explores themes that emerged from the data. Individual responses through the use of direct quotations from the participants are included to capture the essence of the perceptions of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates who are principals with respect to the impact of their NELA training on their performance as administrators and their respective school performance.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was two-fold: (1) to examine the perceptions of NELA-trained principals about the impact of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on the academic performance of their students; and (2) to better understand the perceptions of graduates about their experiences and practices they acquired during their leadership training which NELA fellows attribute to their school’s performance. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the school performance over a three-year span prior to NELA graduates leading the schools?
2. What is the school performance while under the leadership of NELA graduates?
3. What experiences and practices do NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance, if there are any?
Criterion sampling was used to identify potential participants for this study. Potential participants were identified as graduates of NELA and serving in the role of principal at an elementary school in a NELA district. There were eight potential participants identified who met the prescribed criteria for the study. The researcher contacted all potential participants by email to ask of their willingness to participate in the study. All eight of the principals who were identified agreed to participate in the study. With the approval from each of the participants, each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder application on the researcher’s password protected iPad. Interviews were held in the principal’s office or conference room at their respective schools. After the purpose of the study was reviewed and the informed consent form was reviewed and signed by the principal, the interview began. The interviews lasted from 13 minutes to 30 minutes. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. In addition, the researcher assigned names to the participants’ schools for additional protection of the participants’ identity.

School Performance Pre-Post-NELA Graduates as Principals

Eight school principals participated in this study, however, this section will discuss school performance data for six of the schools. As illustrated in Table 4.1, only six school results were presented because two did not fit the parameters of the study. Principal No Nonsense is in his first year as principal at Gold Elementary. Therefore, there is no student academic achievement data while under his leadership for comparison to that of traditionally trained principal. Principal Turnaround is the current principal of Yellow Elementary. Prior to her taking the principalship, Yellow Elementary was led by Principal Driven, who too is a NELA-trained principal. This study sought to compare the impact of a NELA-trained
principal to that of a traditionally trained principal. In addition, Principal Driven is now the principal of Green Elementary. Green Elementary was opened in the fall of 2014 as a thematically focused school. Green Elementary has been led by one principal since its inception, so the comparison of a NELA-trained principal to that of a traditionally trained principal is not possible with respect to Green Elementary. Therefore, the researcher will use data for Yellow Elementary while under the leadership of Principal Driven to determine the impact of a NELA-trained principal on student academic achievement.

Table 4.1: School Data Used in Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Principal Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Data Used? (Yes or No)</th>
<th>If No, Explanation of Why Data Not Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gold Elementary</td>
<td>No Nonsense</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>First-year principal. Therefore, student academic data does not exist while under his leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>Current Principal Turnaround</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Prior Principal was also a NELA graduate. Therefore, data does not exist to make comparison between NELA-trained principal and traditionally trained principal while under Principal Turnaround’s leadership. Data will be used for Yellow Elementary while under the leadership of Principal Driven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Data will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Data will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Data will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Data will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Data will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Elementary</td>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>New school, therefore, data does not exist to make comparisons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 below provides an overview of student performance prior to the research participants’ principalship, and since assuming the principalship in their current schools. Inclusion of these data is important because it provides the reader with background
knowledge of school performance prior to the tenure of the NELA-trained principals—which can serve as an indicator of the academic growth experienced after the onset of the NELA-trained principals’ leadership. Data displayed in highlighted cells serves as a point of comparison for the researcher (and the reader) of the student achievement in schools where these NELA principals have been in leadership roles for the corresponding school years. Also, displayed in Table 4.2 is a clear indication that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented statewide at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year.

Porter, Fusarelli, and Fusarelli (2015) note that school change depends heavily on the classroom learning environment. The implementation of the CCSS in the 2012-2013 school year represented a significant challenge for teachers (Porter et al., 2015). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) warned the public that student performance on state assessments would drop due to the abrupt implementation of more rigorous standards (Wagner, 2013).

To ensure a more robust study, the researcher sought to compare three years of student achievement data prior to the NELA-trained principal taking on the principalship to student achievement data while under the leadership of the NELA-trained principal. However, the lack of a concordance table to compare testing data from the prior North Carolina standards to that of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) made it difficult for the researcher to make a comparison. To ensure the data comparison was based upon the same testing standards and content, the researcher used data post the CCSS implementation, which was school year 2012-2013 and beyond. Based on data from the NCDPI website, North Carolina Assessments are curriculum-based achievement tests. The assessments which
are mandatory for all students in grades three through twelve, are administered yearly during the last 10 days of the school year.

Table 4.2: Student Proficiency Prior to and while Under NELA Principal Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Principal Pseudonym</th>
<th>2010-2011 (%)</th>
<th>2011-2012 (%)</th>
<th>2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year</th>
<th>2014-2015 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2014 to 2015 Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>+33.5</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>+4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>+15.8</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>+15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>+18.2</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>+7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary¹</td>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>+8.4</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary²</td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary³</td>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>+16.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Under NELA graduate leadership*

It is important to note that the implementation of the CCSS resulted in a decrease of student proficiency scores across the state. The state’s overall proficiency score on student assessments at the end of the 2012-2013 school year was 44.7%, down from 77.9% (Wagner, 2013). Fullan (2001) urges readers to appreciate the reality of the implementation dip:

One of our most consistent findings and understandings about the change process in education is that all successful school experience “implementation dips” as they move forward (Fullan, 2001). The implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and
confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings. All innovations worth their salt call upon people to question and in some respects to change their behavior and their beliefs – even in cases where innovations are pursued voluntarily. (p. 40)

The NELA-trained principals took on the role of principals for the 2013-2014 school year, the year after the CCSS were implemented. The data show that Blue Elementary had the largest student proficiency gains of the four elementary schools in the district during the 2013-2014 school year and the second largest gains in the 2014-2015 school year (see Appendix E for comparisons). Yellow Elementary had the second largest gains in student performance of the five schools in the district during the 2013-2014 school year (see Appendix F for comparisons). Brown Elementary had the third largest gains out of the eight schools in the district during the 2014-2015 school year (see Appendix G for comparisons). Magenta Elementary had the largest student proficiency gains in the district of four schools during the 2013-2014 school year and had the least amount of gains of the four schools during the 2014-2015 school year (see Appendix H for comparisons). Pink Elementary is in the same district as Magenta Elementary (see Appendix H for comparisons). Pink Elementary had the second largest student proficiency gains during the 2013-2014 school year (second to Magenta Elementary), and had the largest gains in student proficiency of the four schools during the 2014-2015 school year (see Appendix H for comparisons). Turquoise Elementary had the ninth largest gains of the twelve schools in the district during the 2013-2014 school year and the fourth largest gains during the 2014-2015 school year (see Appendix I for comparisons).
North Carolina has placed an emphasis on third grade literacy through the Read to Achieve (RTA). Students not proficient by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers (Hernandez, 2011). The RTA program was implemented in the 2013-2014 school year. RTA specifically targeted third grade literacy. The expected outcome of RTA is that every student will read at or above grade level by the end of third grade. Based upon the NCDPI website, students who are proficient on the 3rd-grade EOG or qualify for a "good cause exemption" are promoted to Grade 4. Students who are not proficient may be retained in third grade or placed in fourth grade with extra reading instruction and interventions.

Table 4.3 provides an overview of the change in third-grade reading proficiency prior to the research participants’ principalship in comparison to their first year in the principalship. Inclusion of these data is important because it provides the reader with background knowledge of the schools third-grade reading performance prior to the tenure of the NELA-trained principals – which can serve as an indicator of the academic growth experienced after the onset of the NELA-trained principals’ leadership. Data displayed in highlighted cells, serves as a point of comparison for the researcher (and the reader) of the reading status in schools where these NELA principals have been in leadership roles for the corresponding years.
Table 4.3: Students’ Third-Grade Reading Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>School Year 2012-2013 (Pre-NELA)</th>
<th>School Year 2013-2014 (NELA Principal)</th>
<th>Change in Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>+33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>+23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>+12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>+10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>+35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>+12.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall proficiency and third-grade reading proficiency provides information on whether or not students are performing on grade level. These data represent status measures of student academic achievement; however, it is important to also focus on student growth. Because students enter a grade at different places academically, student growth is, in some cases, a superior measure in terms of determining a teacher’s impact on their achievement over the course of a school year (Baker et al., 2010). Some students may excel, while other students may struggle. Student growth accounts for the amount of academic progress students make over the course of a year, regardless of their academic starting point.

North Carolina utilizes the Educational Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) as the statewide model for measuring student growth. Table 4.4 provides an overview of EVAAS growth status of the research participants’ schools prior to their principalship and since assuming the principalship. Inclusion of these data is important because it provides the reader with background knowledge of school EVAAS growth status prior to the tenure of the NELA-trained principals – which can serve as an indicator of the academic growth experienced after the onset of the NELA-trained principals’ leadership. Data displayed in
highlighted cells serve as points of comparison for the researcher (and the reader) of the growth status in schools where these NELA principals have been in leadership roles for the corresponding years.

Table 4.4: School Growth Status Designation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Exceeded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>Met*</td>
<td>Met*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>**²</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Represents the year the school was led by a NELA graduate

Summary of School Performance

Five of the six (83%) schools lead by NELA graduates increased student proficiency during the research participants’ *first year* as principal in their schools. Of the five schools that had gains, four of the schools gained more than 15 percentage points. It is worthy to note that Brown Elementary did not show significant gains, but student proficiency stayed steady from the year previous. This means that the school did not experience an implementation dip.
as would be expected during the first year of a new principal leading the school (Fullan, 2001).

The schools led by NELA graduates not only avoided the implementation dip but increased reading proficiency. All schools gained 10 percentage points or higher with a first-year NELA principal leading the school. This gain could be described as “dramatic”. The proficiency of students reveals one part of the story. Another piece to the story of increasing student academic achievement is growth, “Did the students show growth?” In some instances, students may meet the proficiency cut off but not show growth from year to year. In other words, it is possible to have students who are on grade level but don’t show growth. It is also possible to have students show growth, but don’t meet the proficiency cut off. Ideally, students will meet proficiency and show growth. However, in cases where students are starting school two to three years behind grade level, they must exceed growth to “catch up” with their peers.

It is important to note that growth in high-poverty schools is complicated by large summer learning loss. Downey, Von Hippel, & Broh (2004) found that students learn at much more equal rates when school is in session than when it is not. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2001) developed the “faucet theory” to explain this summer learning loss phenomenon, which states that, when school is in session, the school resource faucet is on and children of every economic background benefit roughly equally. When school is not in session, however, such as during summer vacation, the school resource faucet is turned off. When the school resource faucet is turned off, reading proficiency among children from more economically advantaged families continued to develop, whereas economically disadvantage
children’s achievement reached a plateau or even fell back during the summer months (Entwisle et al., 2001). Thus, making a spring to spring measure of student growth difficult to capture the actual achievement growth of students.

The data in Table 4.4 identifies the growth status of each school participating in this study. Five of the six (83%) schools either met or exceeded growth. Ideally, students will gain a year’s worth of learning for a year’s worth of instruction, which is the “met growth” status. If students are lagging academically, as usually is the case in turnaround schools, they need more than a year’s learning for a year of instruction. It is imperative for students who are behind to exceed growth to catch up with their peers academically.

**Participants and Context**

The participants of this study included eight school administrators who graduated from North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA). Table 4.5: Demographic Profile of Principals, displays demographics of the participants of this study. The age range of the eight participating principals is 32 to 54 years old; two are between the ages of 30-34; three are between the ages of 35-39, one is between the ages of 40-44, one is between ages 45-49, and one is between the ages 50-54. Seven were female, and one was male. On average, participants had 13 years of experience in education prior to becoming principals. The education experience of participants includes the areas of classroom teacher, assistant principal, instructional and curriculum coach, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher. Five participants had more than 10 years of experience in education, and one participant had 5-10 years of experience in education. None of the participants had less than five years of experience in education. However, all participants had
less than three years of experience as a school administrator. One participant reported being in his first year as a school administrator, one participant had between one and two years of school administrative experience, and six participants had between two and three years of administrative experience. In addition, all eight participants had previous teaching experience. Table 4.5 shows the demographic profile of the current study’s principal participants.

Table 4.5: Demographic Profile of Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education Experience (Years)</th>
<th>Route to Teacher Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Nonsense</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4 Teacher, 2 Assistant Principal, 0 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Teacher Education Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnaround</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Teacher Education Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Teacher Education Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 8 Other</td>
<td>Teach For America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Lateral Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Lateral Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 8 Other</td>
<td>Lateral Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19 Teacher, 1 Assistant Principal, 2 Principal, 1 Other</td>
<td>Teacher Education Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 displays student demographics by ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the schools led by the principals in this study.
Table 4.6: Student Demographics by Socioeconomic Status and Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Principal (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>FRL</th>
<th>Title 1</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>Turnaround (current principal)</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Elementary</td>
<td>No Nonsense</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>91.9%</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>Driven (former principal)</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>Thick-skinned</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As displayed in Table 4.6, all schools participating in the study are “high-poverty schools” as indicated by the Title 1 designation, and all but one of the schools are high-minority. Leading high-poverty, high-minority schools is a common theme among participants, which brought a unique set of challenges for each of them in leading their schools. The rural location of the schools brings additional challenges for recruiting and retaining effective teachers and principals. About 50% of the schools in North Carolina are located in rural areas, and most of the low-performing rural schools are concentrated in the rural northeastern part of the state.

School Descriptions and Study Participants

To help the reader better understand the significance of the student outcome data presented, the researcher provides a description of each school and snapshots of the eight principals before proceeding with the cross-case analysis. To help build context for each
school, the researcher included school size, student attendance, class size, and teacher quality in comparison with the district and state. The additional data points for each school is included to help the reader have a deeper understanding of the school instructional environment. The snapshots of participants explain how participants got their researcher-assigned pseudonym and demonstrate the themes that emerged from the data.

Yellow Elementary

School description. Yellow Elementary is a Title 1 school located in rural northeastern North Carolina. As shown in Table 4.6, it has a large population of minority students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The school size (Yellow Elementary 483, District 485, State 490) is about the same size as the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the district and throughout the state. The average percentage of students who attend Yellow Elementary daily (Yellow Elementary 95.7%, District 93.7%, State 95.1%) is higher than the district and the state. On an average daily basis, 21 students (4.3%) are absent from Yellow Elementary.

Table 4.7 compares the average class size of Yellow Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. More than 50% of the grade levels at Yellow Elementary have class sizes that are the same or smaller than the average number of students enrolled in the typical Grades K-5 classroom at the district and state. As shown in Table 4.7, the average student to teacher ratio for Yellow Elementary is 19:1.
Table 4.7: Average Class Size – Yellow Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Legislation mandates that class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not restricted.

Table 4.8 compares the quality of teaching staff of Yellow Elementary to that of the similar schools in the district and at the state level. Yellow Elementary on average, has two teachers more than similar schools in the district and the state. The school has 5.3% fewer fully licensed teacher than similar school in the district and 8.9% fewer than the state. Yellow Elementary teacher turnover rate is less than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools at the district but higher than the state. The distribution of teachers by their level of teaching experience is distributed across the categories with one-third of the teachers in each category. Yellow Elementary has almost double the number of beginning teachers as the district.

Table 4.8: Teacher Characteristics$^6$ – Yellow Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees (%)</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience (%)</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Elementary</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The percentage of classes at Yellow Elementary taught by highly qualified teachers as defined by Federal Law (Yellow Elementary 100%, District 99.6%, State 98.5%) is slightly higher in comparison to that of the district and state.

In sum, Yellow Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size, average daily attendance, and class size is typical in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The majority of the teachers (almost 70%) at Yellow Elementary have less than 10 years of teaching experience, with 33% having less than four years of experience.

**School principal.** Principal Driven is a Caucasian, female who grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta. Her parents were college-educated, but neither parent was in the field of education. She attended college in North Carolina and remained in the state after graduation to teach in a school district in northeast North Carolina.

Principal Driven is in her third year as principal and her 13th year in education. She began her education career as an English I teacher through Teach for America (TFA). She previously served in several executive leadership roles with TFA. Principal Driven was an assistant principal for one year at a high school before being named principal at an elementary school in a neighboring district. She served one year as principal at an elementary school before being moved to the elementary school where she currently serves as principal.

The interview with Principal Driven was held at Yellow Elementary. When I arrived for the interview, Principal Driven was not available. I waited in the main office for 20 minutes, and the office was very spacious and well organized. The office assistant, who is a native of the district, was welcoming and gave me a brief history of the school while I waited.
for Principal Driven. As Principal Driven walked into the office to greet me, wearing business attire, she apologized for keeping me waiting. Principal Driven appears to be the epitome of a business woman on a mission, with a firm yet inviting demeanor. Through my interactions with her, I learned, she is clear about the conditions in which she works best and believes others work best under the same conditions. She appears to strive to create that culture for the teachers in her school, as she remarked:

Let me just say, in terms of my own preferences, I find it frustrating when somebody comes in and says, "Here's your problem. Here's exactly what you have to do to solve it. Now you better go do it, and I'm gonna check in with you in a couple weeks." That doesn't feel very collaborative. That doesn't feel very empowering. I feel like, for myself, that if I don't appreciate that, I don't think my teachers are going to appreciate that either.

Principal Driven appears intentional with her approach to addressing the culture in her school. To this point, she notes, “We work hard to establish those relationships with the teachers.” She reminisced back to her residency internship year, and chuckled while slapping one hand onto the other, stating, “I can't count the number of times where Jewel [her mentor principal] said to me, she's like, ‘You've gotta get the culture right. You've gotta get the culture right. You've gotta get the culture right.’” Principal Driven reports that she has worked hard to create a culture of collaboration in her school, and values collaboration to improve teacher practice.

School data pre- and post-NELA principal. Yellow Elementary is a high-poverty, high minority school. The school description gave the school context to assist the reader in
gaining a deeper understanding of the student achievement results and challenges faced at Yellow Elementary. These challenges in conjunction with a novice principal could potentially negatively impact student academic performance. Figure 4.1 illustrates the overall student achievement data under a pre-NELA principal in comparison to a first-year NELA principal, and Figure 4.2 shows third-grade reading proficiency under a pre-NELA principal in comparison to a first-year NELA principal.

Figure 4.1: Overall Student Achievement Data – Yellow Elementary
Yellow Elementary achieved significant gains in overall student academic achievement as shown in Figure 4.1 and in 3rd grade reading proficiency as displayed in Figure 4.2. The school achieved a gain of 16.4 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in year one of Principal Driven leading the school. Also, the school saw a gain of 23.5 percentage points in third-grade reading proficiency during year one.

**Magenta Elementary**

**School description.** Magenta Elementary is a Title 1 school located in rural northeastern North Carolina. The grade span at Magenta Elementary is Pre-Kindergarten to third grade. As shown in Table 4.6, Magenta Elementary has a high population of minority students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The school size (Magenta Elementary 120, District 215, State 490) is smaller than the average number of students in schools with similar grade
ranges in their district and in the state. The average percentage of students who are in attendance at Magenta Elementary daily (Magenta Elementary 95.8%, District 94.8%, State 95.1%) is higher than the district and similar schools in the state. On an average daily basis, twenty-three students (4.2%) are absent from Magenta Elementary.

Table 4.9 compares the average class size of Magenta Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. The average class size at Magenta Elementary less than or the same as the average number of students enrolled in the typical K-5 classroom at the district and state level. As shown in Table 4.9, the average student to teacher ratio for Magenta Elementary is 17:1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.10 compares the quality of teaching staff of Magenta Elementary to that of similar schools at the district and state. Magenta Elementary has 100% of teachers that are fully licensed, which is more than similar schools in the district and at the state level. The school has a teacher turnover rate that is less than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools in the district and state level. Almost 70% of the teachers at Magenta Elementary have over 10 years of teaching experience.
Table 4.10: Teacher Characteristics\(^7\) – Magenta Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers*</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees (%)</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience (%)</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magenta Elementary</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of classes taught by Highly Qualified teachers as defined by federal law (Magenta Elementary 100%, District 94.3%, State 98.5%) is higher than the average percent at both the district and state level.

In sum, Magenta Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size is smaller than similar schools at the district and state level. The average daily attendance is slightly higher than that of the district and state. The average class size is smaller in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. All of the teachers at Magenta Elementary are fully licensed, with more than 66% of the teachers having more than ten years of teaching experience.

School principal. Principal Focus is an African-American, female who grew up in northeast North Carolina. She is a first-generation college graduate. She earned an undergraduate degree in Criminal Justice. She entered education as a lateral entry teacher.

Principal Focus is in her third year as principal and 14\(^{th}\) year in education. She began her educational career as an elementary school teacher. After teaching at the elementary level for seven years, she became an Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher.
at the secondary level. After completing her Master’s in School Administration (MSA) through NELA, Principal Focus served as an assistant principal at an elementary school for one year.

When I arrived for the interview, she was handling a discipline situation with a student. She was meeting with the student’s parent in the front office conference room. When the meeting was over, the parent calmly left the office. Principal Focus came out to greet me, wearing a business suit and comfortable shoes. She gave a long sigh and smiled. She directed me to her office where the interview took place. Principal Focus has a calm authoritative demeanor.

Principal Focus received her pseudonym because of her laser-like focus on student academic success. As she explained, “I don’t consider myself a principal, I consider myself an instructional leader.” She understands that the success of students is built upon having knowledgeable teachers. She stated,

As an administrator, you have to know what good instruction looks like, you have to know what the teachers are doing, the impact that it has on students. The attributes teachers are contributing everyday doesn't have an impact on the students, then we're wasting time. I make sure everything that the teachers did had an impact with our student achievement.

Principal Focus reports that she celebrates successes with students and staff, “I make sure students and staff are being recognized for things that they have done well.” She also recognizes the importance of leveraging human capital in her building to positively impact student achievement. This came through in her responses such as:
I'm just going to be honest, we don't have a lot of the right people on the bus. My goal is to get the right people on the bus, and let the managerial, kind of handle itself for a minute. My focus is student achievement and instruction. If we don't get that right, no one will be on the bus.

Principal Focus understands the importance of leveraging the human capital in her building.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** Magenta Elementary is a high-poverty, high minority school. The school description gave the school context to assist the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the student achievement results and challenges faced at Magenta Elementary. These challenges in conjunction with a novice principal could potentially have a negative impact on student academic performance. Figure 4.3 illustrates the overall student achievement data pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal. Figure 4.4 illustrates third-grade reading proficiency, pre-NELA principal in comparison to a first-year NELA principal.
Magenta Elementary achieved significant gains in overall student academic achievement as shown in Figure 4.3 and in third-grade reading proficiency as displayed in Figure 4.4.
Figure 4.4. Magenta Elementary achieved a gain of 33.5 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in year one of Principal Focus leading the school. Also, the school saw a gain of 35 percentage points in third-grade reading proficiency during year one.

*Turquoise Elementary*

**School description.** Turquoise Elementary is a Pre-Kindergarten to second grade, Title 1 school, located in rural northeastern North Carolina. As shown in Table 4.6, Turquoise Elementary is a majority minority school, with a high population of African-American and Hispanic students. A large population of students at Turquoise Elementary are identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced priced lunch. The school size (Turquoise Elementary 555, District 456, State 490) is larger than schools with similar grade ranges in the district and throughout the state. Turquoise Elementary has more than 100 students than schools in the district with similar grade ranges and more than 140 students than schools with similar grade ranges at the state level. The average percentage of students who are in attendance at Turquoise Elementary daily (Turquoise Elementary 94.6%, District 93.8%, State 95.1%) is higher than the district but less than the state. On an average daily basis, about thirty students (5.4%) are absent from Turquoise Elementary.

Table 4.11 compares the average class size of Turquoise Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. All of the grade levels at Turquoise Elementary have class sizes larger than the average class size at the district level and the state level. As illustrated in Table 4.11, the average student to teacher ratio for Turquoise Elementary is 23:1.
Table 4.11: Average Class Size – Turquoise Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not restricted by NC Legislation.*

Table 4.12 compares the quality of teaching staff of Turquoise Elementary to that of the district and state. Turquoise Elementary has on average, seven teachers more than similar schools in the district level and the same number of teachers of similar schools on the state level. All of the teachers at Turquoise Elementary are fully licensed teachers. Turquoise Elementary teacher turnover rate is less than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools at the district and state level. Turquoise Elementary has over 70% of its teaching staff with over 10 years of teaching experience, which is higher than similar schools in the district and at the state level.

Table 4.12: Teacher Characteristics – Turquoise Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees (%)</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise Elementary</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The percentage of highly qualified teachers at Turquoise Elementary (Turquoise Elementary 100%, District 97.8%, State 98.5%), as defined by federal law, is higher in comparison to that of the district and state.

In sum, Turquoise Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size and class size are larger in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The average daily attendance rate is slightly higher than the district but less than similar schools at throughout the state. All the teaching staff at Turquoise Elementary are fully licensed, with more than 70% of the teachers having more than 10 years of teaching experience.

**School principal.** Principal Buffer is an African-American female who grew up in rural northeast North Carolina. She is a first-generation college graduate. She earned an undergraduate degree in English/writing. Principal Buffer worked as a news reporter for five years before going in to the education field. She is a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) and has been named Teacher of the Year at the school level two times during her career. She began her education career as a middle school teacher taught for 13 years before transitioning to an elementary assistant principal for the last two years.

Principal Buffer has been the principal in her current school for three years. She is in her 18th year of education. Principal Buffer has a mild demeanor. She prides herself for taking care of her teachers’ needs, stating, “I like to serve as a buffer for my teachers…Well, a lot of what happens with the kids, happens because of the teachers. The teachers, having a high-quality teacher in front of the kids in the classrooms.” Principal Buffer went on to share that ensuring each student has a high-quality teacher in the classroom is what will drive improved academic performance for students. She stated, “My part in that is developing my
teachers. I do a lot of different types of professional development, but I do specialize in professional development, or maybe I could call it differentiated professional development.”

Principal Buffer claims to pay close attention to the needs of her teachers, “I try to make sure that I’m looking at my teachers’ needs and not just my students’ needs.” She noted:

I like to serve as a buffer for my teachers. Some people might say that they're spoiled, because I do spoil my teachers. That's because they're so good. They need somebody that's going to be in their corner, supports them and that sees the hard work that they're putting in. I am their advocate. I tell them, I'm going to support you all day long unless you do something wrong. If you do something wrong, then I'm going to hear you out about the different things, but I can't support you when you've gone that far. They know I've got their back.

Principal Buffer is in her teachers’ corner. Based on her responses, she has a keen awareness for her teachers’ areas of strength and areas of support. Principal Buffer provides differentiated professional development for her teachers to ensure teachers’ needs are met.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** Turquoise Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school description gave the school context to assist the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the student achievement results and challenges faced at Turquoise Elementary. These challenges in conjunction with a novice principal could potentially have a negative impact on student academic performance. Figure 4.5 illustrates the overall student achievement data pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal. Figure 4.6 illustrates third-grade reading proficiency, pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal.
Turquoise Elementary achieved gains in overall student academic achievement as shown in Figure 4.5 and in third-grade reading proficiency as displayed in Figure 4.6. The school achieved a gain of 8.4 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in
year one of Principal Focus leading the school. Also, the school saw a gain of 12.2 percentage points in third-grade reading proficiency during year one.

**Pink Elementary**

**School description.** Pink Elementary is a Title 1 school located in rural northeastern North Carolina. The grade span at Pink Elementary is Pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. As shown in Table 4.6, Pink Elementary has a large population of students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Pink Elementary has a high population of minority students. As illustrated in Table 4.6, over 50% of the student population is American Indian and about 40% of the student population is African American. The school size (Pink Elementary 197, District 215, State 490) is about 100 students smaller than schools with similar grade ranges in the district and over 300 students smaller than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges throughout the state. The average percentage of students who are in attendance at Pink Elementary daily (Pink Elementary 97%, District 94.8%, State 05.1%) is higher than the district and the state. On an average daily basis, six students (3%) are absent from Pink Elementary.

Table 4.13 compares the average class size of Pink Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. Pink Elementary has class sizes that are smaller than the average number of students enrolled in the typical K-5 classroom in the district and at the state level. As illustrated in Table 4.13, the average student to teacher ratio for Pink Elementary is 13:1.
Table 4.13: Average Class Size – Pink Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Legislation mandates that class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not restricted.

Table 4.14 compares the quality of teaching staff of Pink Elementary to that of the district and state. Pink Elementary has 6% more fully licensed teacher than similar schools in the district and 6% fewer than the state. Pink Elementary teacher turnover rate is higher than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools at the district and state levels. The majority of teachers at Pink Elementary have less than three years of teaching experience.

Table 4.14: Teacher Characteristics* – Pink Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers*</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers*</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>4-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Elementary</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of classes at Pink Elementary (Pink Elementary 92.9%, District 94.3%, State 98.5%) taught by highly qualified teachers, as defined by federal law, is fewer in comparison to similar schools at the district and state level.
In sum, Pink Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size and class size are smaller in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The average daily attendance rate is higher than the district but less than similar schools throughout the state. About 91% of the teachers at Pink Elementary are fully licensed, with almost 60% of the teachers having less than three years of teaching experience.

**School principal.** Principal Compassionate is an African-American, female who has lived in rural northeast North Carolina her entire life. Her parent(s) were college educated but neither parent worked in the education field. Principal Compassionate entered the education field through North Carolina’s lateral entry route.

Principal Compassionate has been in the education field for 23 years. She is in her third year as principal, all of which have been at her current school. She has worked in the same district throughout her career. Principal Compassionate taught at both the elementary and middle school levels then served as an assistant principal for one year before being named principal. Principal Compassionate has a calm and motherly demeanor; she appears to care deeply for her school and has a sense of dedication to her students, staff, and community. During her tenure as a teacher, Principal Compassionate was named Teacher of the Year for her school, and went on to represent the district in the North Carolina Regional Teacher of the Year competition.

The interview was held in Principal Compassionate’s office. She wore slacks and a shirt, with a sweater, and what appeared to be comfortable shoes. She explained that her dedication to students and staff is shown through the way she spends her time during the
school day. During her interview, she noted, “I’m in the classroom every day, not in my office.” To this she added, “I focus on instruction during the day when the students.” She pointed at different piles of papers on her desk with a chuckle as she commented:

You can see pockets of work, things just starting and everything has its little place so at the end of the day, when instruction is done and the students are gone and my teachers no longer have conversations with me, then my principal work begins in the office, paperwork detail.

Principal Compassionate reports spending most of her day in classrooms, supporting students and staff. Principal Supportive spends her day in a very similar manner. She prides herself for working hand and hand with her teachers and students.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** Pink Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school description gave the school context to assist the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the student achievement results and challenges faced at Pink Elementary. These challenges in conjunction with a novice principal could potentially lead to a negative impact student academic performance. Figure 4.7 illustrates the overall student achievement data pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal. Figure 4.8 illustrates third-grade reading proficiency, pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal.
Pink Elementary achieved significant gains in overall student academic achievement as shown in Figure 4.7 and in third-grade reading proficiency as displayed in Figure 4.8. The
school achieved a gain of 15.8 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in year one of Principal Driven leading the school. Also, the school saw a gain of 10.6 percentage points in third-grade reading proficiency during year one.

**Blue Elementary**

**School description.** Blue Elementary is a Title 1 school located in rural northeastern North Carolina. As shown in Table 4.6, Blue Elementary has a large population of minority students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. The school size (Blue Elementary 217, District 257, State 490) is smaller than schools with similar grade ranges in their district and throughout the state. The average percentage of students who attend Blue Elementary daily (Blue Elementary 95.9%, District 94.7%, State 95.1%) is higher than the district and the state. On an average daily basis, nine students (4.1%) are absent from Blue Elementary.

Table 4.15 below compares the average class size of Blue Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. The majority of grade levels at Blue Elementary have class sizes that are smaller than the average number of students enrolled in the typical K-5 classroom at the district and state. However, the Kindergarten class size is larger. As illustrated in Table 4.15, the average student to teacher ratio for Blue Elementary is 16:1.
Table 4.15: Average Class Size – Blue Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not legislative mandated.

Table 4.16 compares the quality of teaching staff of Blue Elementary to that of the district and state. Blue Elementary has about the same percentage of fully licensed teacher as similar schools in the district and 4.5% fewer than similar schools at the state level. Blue Elementary teacher turnover rate is higher than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools at the district and state levels. Blue Elementary has almost twice as many teachers with less than three years of experience than as the district and more than double that of the state. The teacher turnover rate for Blue Elementary is higher than the district and state levels.

Table 4.16: Teacher Characteristics[^10] – Blue Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers*</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers*</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>4-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Elementary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>93.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The percentage of classes at Blue Elementary (Blue Elementary 93.9%, District 96%, State 98.5%) taught by highly qualified teachers, as defined by federal law, is fewer in comparison to the percentage of classes taught by teachers identified as highly qualified at both the district and state level.

In sum, Blue Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size and class size are smaller in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The average daily attendance rate is slightly higher than the district and the state. Blue Elementary has fewer fully licensed teachers in comparison to the state, with almost 47% of the teachers having less than three years of teaching experience.

**School principal.** Principal Supportive is a Caucasian female who grew up in rural Virginia. At the age of twelve, her family moved to northeast North Carolina, where she currently resides. She is a first-generation college graduate. Principal Supportive has experience teaching at the elementary and middle school levels. Principal Supportive was named Teacher of the Year three times at the elementary school level, and once at the district level. She was also recognized as the Wal-Mart Teacher of the Year for the northeast region.

Principal Supportive is in her third year as principal and her 24th year in education. She began her educational career by serving as an elementary teacher, where she taught for 10 years, then she worked as a middle school teacher for five years. She served as an assistant principal at the high school level for one year. She is in her third year as principal at her current school. Principal Supportive appears to have a kind and loving demeanor.

When I arrived for the interview, the administrative assistant told me that Principal Supportive would be with me shortly. Principal Supportive entered the main office to greet
me, and began to share why she was running behind in a calm voice. Principal Supportive reminded me of a loving aunt who always makes you feel at home and at ease. As we entered into her office, I saw two young boys eating lunch at the conference table sitting toward the middle of the office. Principal Supportive asked the boys, “Will you two be okay finishing up lunch with Mrs. Green?” The boys mumbled a few words back to Principal Supportive. It was clear the boys enjoyed the attention they receive from Principal Supportive and she likewise enjoyed working with them.

Principal Supportive apologized for the late start and we transitioned into the interview. Principal Supportive appears to value her staff and students. She reported that it is important to her that the school community trusts her, “One of the first things that I asked them [teachers] to do was to trust.” Principal Supportive is willing to “roll up her sleeves” and work side by side with school staff. She reported that she does not get discouraged when staff gives her pushback, in an understanding voice and a caring look on her face. She stated:

You have those that say, "We've always done it this way. In Blue Elementary, we always do it this way." I think that's always the case when you first come into a school. They were all willing to try after a while. I think that it was built on trust. After the trust was built and they knew that I was here day and night with them whatever it took and that I was right along the side with them, the trust was there.

School data pre- and post-NELA principal. Blue Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school description gave the school context to assist the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the student achievement results and challenges faced at Blue Elementary. These challenges in conjunction with a novice principal could potentially
negatively impact student academic performance. Figure 4.9 illustrates the overall student achievement data pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal. Figure 4.10 illustrates third-grade reading proficiency, pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal.

Figure 4.9: Overall Student Achievement Data – Blue Elementary
Blue Elementary achieved significant gains in overall student academic achievement as shown in Figure 4.9 and in 3rd grade reading proficiency as displayed in Figure 4.10. The school achieved a gain of 18.2 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in year one of Principal Driven leading the school. Also, the school saw a gain of 33.8 percentage points in 3rd grade reading proficiency during year one.

**Brown Elementary**

**School description.** Brown Elementary is a Title 1 school located in the Northeast Piedmont area of North Carolina. As shown in Table 4.6, Brown Elementary has 40% of students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Table 4.6 illustrates that Brown Elementary does not have a very diverse student population. The majority student population at Brown Elementary is
white. The school size (Brown Elementary 481, District 392, State 490) is 89 students more than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the district and nine students less than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the state. The average percentage of students who attend Brown Elementary daily (Brown Elementary 95.4%, District 95.1, State 95.1%) is about the same as the district and the state. On an average daily basis, 22 students (4.6%) are absent from Brown Elementary.

Table 4.17 compares the average class size of Brown Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. More than 50% of the grade levels at Brown Elementary have class sizes that are either smaller than or the same as the average number of students enrolled in the typical Grades K-5 classroom at the district and state level. The average student to teacher ratio for Brown Elementary is 20:1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Legislation mandates that class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not restricted.

Table 4.18 compares the quality of teaching staff of Brown Elementary to that of the district and state. Brown Elementary has on average, five more teachers than similar schools in the district and four teachers less than similar schools in the state. All of the teaching staff
at Brown Elementary are fully licensed teachers. Brown Elementary has more fully licensed teachers and teachers with advanced degrees than similar schools in the district and similar schools at the state level. Brown Elementary has a teacher turnover rate that is less than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools in the district but higher than similar schools at the state level. Most teachers at Brown Elementary have more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Table 4.18: Teacher Characteristics\textsuperscript{11} – Brown Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers*</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers*</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>4-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elementary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of classes at Brown Elementary taught by highly qualified teachers (Brown Elementary 100%, District 96.9%, State 98.5%) as defined by federal law, is higher than that of the district and state. All the teachers at Brown Elementary are highly qualified teachers.

In sum, Brown Elementary is a high-poverty school, with school size and class size about the same in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The average daily attendance rate is about the same as the district but less than similar schools at
throughout the state. All the teaching staff at Brown Elementary are fully licensed, with 70% of the teachers having more than ten years of teaching experience.

School principal. Principal Thick-skinned is a Caucasian female who grew up in an urban community in a northern state on the east coast. She worked in retail management for three years before entering the education field. She is a first-generation college graduate. Principal Thick-skinned’s route to becoming a teacher was through a traditional teacher education program.

Principal Thick-skinned has been a principal for two years, and has worked in education for 10 years. She served as an elementary teacher for seven years before earning her Master’s degree in School Administration through NELA, at which point she held her first elementary school assistant principal position for the past one year. While serving as a classroom teacher, Principal Thick-skinned was named Teacher of the Year at the elementary school level. Principal Thick-skinned has a warm and sincere demeanor.

The interview with Principal Thick-skinned was held on a Friday, which was a casual dress day for school staff. Principal Thick-skinned met me in the front office. She was wearing jeans, a polo shirt with the school logo, and athletic shoes. Her youthful appearance may have led to her being mistaken as a high school student. As we began the interview, her knowledge and skillset for leading her school became evident. Her leadership style matches her demeanor and dress - informal. She leads with care for her staff and works intentionally on building relationships. Principal Thick-skinned stated:

I have a very good relationship with the majority of the staff to the point that they can come and tell me anything and they know that it's not going to offend me, I'm going to
hear them openly. I think...but on the other side of that when you open yourself up to a large amount of input you do have to have a very tough skin and be willing to hear what people have to say, not take it personally.

Principal Thick-skinned reported creating a culture of open dialogue in her school. In a similar way, Principal Driven has been intentional with her approach to create a culture of collaboration.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** Brown Elementary is a high-poverty school. The school description and profile gave the reader the school context to assist in a deeper understanding of the student achievement data. Figure 4.11 illustrates the overall student achievement data pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal. Figure 4.12 illustrates third-grade reading proficiency, pre-NELA principal in comparison to first-year NELA principal.

*Figure 4.11: Overall Student Achievement Data – Brown Elementary*
Brown Elementary did not see significant gains in overall proficiency but avoided the implementation dip as displayed in Figure 4.11. Brown Elementary did see a significant increase in third-grade reading proficiency as shown in Figure 4.12. The school saw a loss of 0.1 percentage points in overall student academic achievement in year one of Principal Thick-skinned leading the school. The school saw a gain of 12.0 percentage points in third-grade reading proficiency during year one.

Gold Elementary

School description. Gold Elementary is a Title 1 school located in rural northeastern North Carolina. As shown in Table 4.6, Gold Elementary has a large population of students identified as low-socioeconomic status based upon the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Gold Elementary does not have a very diverse student population. The
majority student population at Gold Elementary is African American. The school size (Gold Elementary 428, District 456, State 490) is twenty-eight students less than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the district and sixty-two students less than the average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the state. The average percentage of students who attend Gold Elementary daily (Gold Elementary 94.9%, District 93.8%, State 95.1%) is higher than the district but less than the state. On an average daily basis, 23 students (5.1%) are absent from Gold Elementary.

Table 4.19 compares the average class size of Gold Elementary to that of schools of similar size within the district and throughout the state. More than 50% of the grade levels at Gold Elementary has class sizes larger than the average number of students enrolled in the typical K-5 classroom at the district level and 100% of the average class size at the state level. As illustrated in Table 4.19, the average student to teacher ratio for Gold Elementary is 22:1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gold Elementary</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Legislation mandates that class sizes for Grades 4-12 are not restricted.
Table 4.20 compares the quality of teaching staff of Gold Elementary to that of the district and state. Gold Elementary has on average, three teachers less than similar schools in the district and ten less than similar schools in the state. On average, Gold Elementary has fewer fully licensed teachers than the district and state. The school has fewer teachers with advanced degrees that the district and state. The district has double the number of teachers with advanced degrees than Gold Elementary, while the state has almost triple the number of teachers with advanced degrees. Gold Elementary teacher turnover rate is higher than the teacher turnover rate of similar schools at the district and state level. The school has a higher number of beginning teachers than the district and state.

### Table 4.20: Teacher Characteristics\(^2\) – Gold Elementary (NCDPI Website)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Classroom Teachers*</th>
<th>Fully Licensed Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers with Advanced Degrees</th>
<th>National Board Certified Teachers*</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teacher Turnover Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>4-10 years</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>95.4%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.7%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of classes at Gold Elementary (Gold Elementary 95%, District 97.8%, State 98.5%) taught by highly qualified teachers, as defined by federal law, is lower than the percentage of classes taught by highly qualified teachers at the district and state.
In sum, Gold Elementary is a high-poverty, high-minority school. The school size is larger in comparison to similar schools at the state and class sizes are larger in comparison to similar schools at the district and the state. The average daily attendance rate is slightly higher than the district but less than similar schools throughout the state. Less than 88% of the teaching staff at Gold Elementary are fully licensed, with more than 38% of the teachers having less than three years of teaching experience and more than 50% of the teachers having more than 10 years of teaching experience.

School principal. Principal No Nonsense is an African-American male who is in his first year as principal at Gold Elementary. He grew up in rural northeastern North Carolina and is a first-generation college graduate. He earned an undergraduate degree in teaching. Principal No Nonsense was named Teacher of the Year at the elementary school level. He was also named, Outstanding Elementary School Mathematics Teacher by the North Carolina Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Principal No Nonsense has completed one year as principal is in his ninth year of his education career. Principal No Nonsense appears to have a firm but supportive demeanor. He taught elementary Math for four years before transitioning into an assistant principal position. He served as an assistant principal for the past two years.

Principal No Nonsense claims to hold his teachers accountable for taking ownership of student achievement data, “When there are some things that are not going right and some data points that are not going in the right direction, we have to own it.” Principal No Nonsense shared that instead of teachers looking at the data to improve instruction to ensure students are learning, the recurring them that emerged from one-on-one meetings he had with
staff members was consistently, “The students are not working hard enough. The students are not taking it seriously.”

Principal No Nonsense has first-hand experience with improving student performance in challenging schools, “My four years of working with fifth-grade math, for example, our proficiency increased from 26% to 95%.” Based upon his personal success working with students in challenging schools, Principal No Nonsense operates from the mindset of, “it can be done.” He says he has zero tolerance for teachers making excuses or blaming students.

Principal No Nonsense, head nodding and elbows prop on the arms of his chair with his hands clasp stated,

One of the things that I had to do was establish the very first day, we're not going to be about excuses. We talked about that we have to take ownership, but we had to really focus on solutions. We're not going to make excuses. Another thing that I talked to the staff a lot about is drama, that we just don't have time for drama because the reality is we have several students who already come to us deficit in vocabulary or literacy, and we have to stay focused and harness our energy on the 7-1/2 hours that we have them in our building. We can't get so caught up in those outside factors that are beyond our control, because we can't control the neighborhood our students live in. We can't control what their parents do and do not do when they're home. We have to focus on those things that we have a direct influence or that's within our direct circle of influence when we're at school.”

Based on his past performance as a classroom teacher, Principal No Nonsense has a deep understanding of curriculum and instruction. He has leverage his success as a classroom
teacher to build relationships and gain credibility with his staff. This has allowed Principal No Nonsense to push his teachers to ownership and accountability for student learning.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** Principal No Nonsense is in his first year as principal. Data does not exist to make a comparison of his impact on student academic achievement.

*Yellow Elementary (Part 2)*

**School description.** The school description and data for Yellow Elementary is shared in the section with Principal Driven. Principal Turnaround is the current principal of Yellow Elementary. Prior to her taking the principalship, Yellow Elementary was led by Principal Driven, who too is a NELA-trained principal. This study sought to compare the impact of a NELA-trained principal to that of a traditionally trained principal. Therefore, the researcher used the data for Yellow Elementary while under the leadership of Principal Driven.

**School principal.** Principal Turnaround is a Caucasian, female who is in her second year as principal at Yellow Elementary. She grew up in rural northeastern North Carolina and is a first-generation college graduate. She earned her undergraduate degree in elementary education, but has taught both elementary and secondary levels.

Principal Turnaround is in her second year as principal and in her 10th year of overall education experience. She began her career in education as an elementary science and math teacher for two years before transitioning to a high school math teacher position for five years. She served as an elementary assistant principal for the past one year. She recognizes the importance of teachers understanding the vision she has for her school. She has shifted
her thinking from what she understands about turnaround and explore the question, “Does her teachers understand turnaround?” She remarked:

I remember reading an article in *Educational Leadership* and it was talking about what are the five top principles of things that you should be doing to turn around a school, and I'm like, Yep. We got that. Yep. We got that. We got that. Then, I had to take a step back and I said, Ah, and our leadership team has it, but I don't think our teachers have that. I don't think our teachers have that. I don't think our teachers have that. That has been the biggest step back for me is saying even though I have it, do our teachers have it? Do they have that understanding, and just being aware of that and making sure that I'm explicitly explaining things to them in a way so that they understand how this aligns with what we're doing here, and which aligns with what we're doing here?

Principal Turnaround stated that she continues to read literature to increase her knowledge in school turnaround. She is clear that one area to focus on early to get staff buy-in, is to have a clear vision for the direction she is taking the school and the ability to articulate her vision to the staff.

**School data pre- and post-NELA principal.** The purpose of this study is to compare student achievement data pre-NELA graduate and post-NELA graduate. Yellow Elementary was led by a NELA graduate prior to Principal Turnaround. Thus, the student achievement data for Yellow Elementary was displayed in the section with Principal Driven who led the school prior to Principal Turnaround.
Presentation of Findings

Now that a snapshot of the schools and their leaders has been presented, the findings from this study will be shared. After a careful examination and analysis of the interview transcriptions and document analysis, the following dominant themes emerged:

1. “The NELA experience” impacted the graduates’ job as school leaders, specifically dispositional attributes in NELA Competencies.

2. NELA training helped research participants create a positive school culture, specifically emphasis on building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, and celebrating successes.

3. The central role that instructional leadership plays in participants’ roles as school principals and how NELA adequately prepared the participants to be effective instructional leaders.

4. NELA training prepared participants to address their biggest challenges.

Experiences and Practices of School Leaders

The experiences the research participants attributed to their impact on student achievement was through their NELA experience. Specifically, the research participants stated NELA training gave them the confidence to be a principal, the skillset and mindset to be resourceful, and a growth mind-set way of problem solving. The key practices the graduates attribute to their impact on student achievement were creating a positive school culture and their serving in the role of instructional leader.
The NELA Experience

Overall, participants for this study attributed their “NELA experience” for preparing them well to do the work of school principal. They shared how their NELA training helped shape their thinking and provided opportunities to build their skillsets. Based upon conversations and observations of traditionally trained principals, many of the participants felt their NELA training was more aligned with realistic challenges school leaders face than traditional principal preparation programs offered. Many of the participants expressed the power of their NELA experience, Principal Compassionate shared, as she smiled and took a deep breath, “Everyone should be NELA. It is very powerful.”

The majority of participants stressed the need to have more principal preparation programs like NELA. Principal Turnaround felt strongly about how her NELA experience prepared her for the role of school leadership, she advocated for all future school leaders to have the same opportunity as she had through NELA. While leaning in towards me with sincerity and passion in her voice, she stated, “I am advocating for more opportunities for people to have principal preparation programs similar to this [NELA].” Another participant, with a look of disbelief on her face and a voice of concern stated, “I speak with people that did not go through the NELA program and they cannot believe the wealth of experiences that were given to me.”

The overarching perception of NELA fellows is that they are different from traditionally trained principals. Principal Compassionate’s statement summed up the thoughts of the research participants:
...having that network or toolbox of resources whenever you have a question or you have an idea or you're trying to do something innovative, you can always relate back to NELA. You can go back to your readings or you can just call NELA and say this is what I’m thinking. Tell me what you think. They always have a connection that aligns with where you are. If they don’t, sooner or later, you're going to get an article or something that says, hey, this is it. That’s the most profound connection with NELA, especially as a graduate because they keep you up-to-date with what’s happening in education and even with the new NELA cohort teams. They’re able to have some … They [NELA principals] think like you think and understand the way that you do because a NELA principal is different than traditional. Everyone doesn’t understand your thoughts sometimes or why you're doing what you're doing, but through NELA, you have a toolbox of people that you can reach out to.

Principal Thick-skinned shared an example of how NELA’s approach to principal preparation is not only about learning a process but the thinking and mindset that supports the process. She shared how NELA helped shape her thinking around community. Principal Think-skinned has the mindset that she is not here to “save” the community. This way of thinking came from NELA’s intentional focus on changing mindsets. Principal Thick-skinned learned through her NELA training to view community as an asset, build upon the strength of the community, and honor the history of the community. She stated:

The community piece, I think the focus on who is it that you're reaching is really important particularly to have rural context. I think the idea that you are not saving people. That is not my job. I am not Superman, nor will I ever be and I liked that we
were constantly reminded that regardless of which leadership context that we're in that can't be our mindset. The mindset has to be...Your community already has within its power and within its grasp what it [community] needs to be successful. It's just our job to make sure people can realize that potential.

The NELA graduates report the program supports NELA fellows to think about the thinking behind decisions and processes. Also, the NELA program help strengthen the NELA fellows network of resources to pull upon once they are in the principal role.

The NELA “Tool Box”

Based on the investigator’s experience in educational leadership, educators bring with them a “tool box.” This tool box is a metaphor for the resources educational leaders bring with them to help them in performing the duties of their position. However, not all people are sure of the contents of their “tool boxes” or how to access them. NELA fellows differ in that they are made aware that they have a “tool box,” are provided additional tools during their training, and they become skilled at tapping into its resources. Participants spoke of ongoing support from NELA fellows, NELA staff, and their executive coaches beyond graduation from the NELA program. NELA fellows have confidence that they are not acting in isolation. They feel connected to their cohort peers well after they finish the program. Similarly, they are also keenly aware of other human resources they can pull upon when needed, namely, NELA staff and their executive coach once they are in school leadership positions. Principal Compassionate adds to this:

…having that network or toolbox of resources whenever you have a question or you have an idea or you're trying to do something innovative, you can always relate back
to NELA. You can go back to your readings or you can just call NELA and say this is what I’m thinking. Tell me what you think. They always have a connection that aligns with where you are. If they don’t, sooner or later, you're going to get an article or something that says, hey, this is it… through NELA, you have a toolbox of people that you can reach out to.

Principal No Nonsense adds to this as he demonstrates sincere appreciation for his executive coach. He expresses his sentiment in this way,

Not only did my executive coach help me through the internship process, but even today, I can still pick up the phone and call him about the job. Say, "Look, man. I want to talk to you about this. I'm not quite sure as to what may be the best way to handle this and to navigate through this process." He causes me to be very reflective.”

Overall, all the participants felt to take on the role of school leader there must be an intrinsic belief in “self” to make a difference, a growth mindset, and an asset model way of thinking. NELA training focuses on dispositional attributes. The research participants tend to see things in a positive manner, thus they respond to situation in a stable and almost predictable manner. NELA fellows have a sense of self-efficacy, a belief that they are prepared to do the work of school principal. Many of the research participants attributed their confidence to take on the role of principal to their preparation through NELA. Principal Supportive expressed her level of confidence to lead:

I don't know how prepared I would have been going into my assistant principalship if I went through a program that was not like NELA. When I was called in and told, "I'm naming you assistant principal", I wasn't nervous about it. I felt like I was serving in
the assistant principal role. The nerves weren't there and I felt like I was fully prepared for that.

Principal Compassionate shared, “NELA covered everything. I don’t think they missed much of anything. I had exactly what I needed [to be an effective leader].” Principal Focus added, “NELA gave me the confidence to do this. I really don't think, if there wasn't a NELA program, I would be the instructional leader [I am] today.” Principal No Nonsense stated, “Everything we did in NELA, it was very intentional. It was very purposeful. It was designed to better prepare us for leaders. Everything we did, it was beneficial.”

In the principal role, there may be unforeseen road blocks. Is the glass half empty or half full? Research participants operate from the “glass half full” perspective. NELA principals have the mindset of “doing whatever it takes” to improve education opportunities for students. They attribute their mindset of building on the strengths of people around them to their NELA training. This mindset of being resourceful is evident in how they view available resources for their schools. As Principal Compassionate declared:

NELA has taught me that if you don’t have … You work with what you have in order to lead the change. Failure is not an option and you don’t give up because you don’t have the things that you feel like you should. You keep fighting and you work hard and you persevere to get to where you need to be.

Principal Thick-skinned similarly shared, “The mindset has to be...Your community already has within its power and within its grasp what it needs to be successful. It's our job to make sure people can realize that potential.” As Principal Driven put forth, in a compelling manner: “Everybody has strengths. Everybody has gifts, and trying to figure out what those
are and how you can leverage those is so critical, so I think that's something that I really took from NELA.”

NELA principals in this study are overwhelmingly positive and operationalize asset based thinking that supports the idea of, making good use of resources available as the school leaders. NELA fellows have a deep understanding of how to maximize available resources. They seem to utilize asset based thinking in addressing the culture in their schools.

### Creating a Positive School Culture

The culture of a school has an impact on improving student outcomes and teachers’ willingness to go the extra mile (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). One of the practices research participants attribute to their impact on student achievement was creating a positive school culture with emphasis on building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, and celebrating successes. The candidates stressed the importance of getting the culture right in their schools. Principal Driven shared, “We have been working really hard to get the culture right.” She reminisced back to her residency experience. She recalled her mentor principal emphasizing the importance of building a culture of high expectations within the school. Principal Driven was intentional in her approach to her school’s culture. She stated:

We did put some stakes in the ground around the culture. We said that we are going to be a school, for instance, that really seeks to embrace restorative practices and restorative approaches to discipline, as opposed to the more punitive, traditional approaches to student discipline, so that was one piece. We said we are going to teach
character, and that's going to be a part of what we do every day, so we do teach the seven habits of highly effective people. That was really important, and we've really started that from day one.

Principal Supportive added:

When I first came, the first year, with the culture here, we had a disjointed culture. People did not feel united. We did not have a united front. We did not have a united school. That was the first thing I built, a community of leaders. The community of understanding. We are a united front. We are a family. We work together as Blue Elementary School. I think that understanding the culture of the school and understanding each other helps us depend upon each other more and to realize we can't do it by our self.

Research participants placed an emphasis on creating a positive culture in their schools. A key component to creating a positive culture, is connecting with key stakeholders to build meaningful relationships.

Building Relationships

Participants expressed building relationships with staff and students is key to moving forward with their vision. Participants shared that teachers are willing to take risk and try a new approach if they feel supported. They also shared, students will go the extra mile when they know you care. Principal Turnaround stated, “Really one of my big roles first has been building relationships.” Principal Compassionate shared:

…one of the most important ones is just what I’ve been talking about, is being a relationship builder. Getting to know people, not just the here and the now, but little
personal things, if you remember it's someone’s birthday today or if you're looking sad
today and you're just somebody knowing that today you look a little different. Are you
feeling okay? Being open.

Principal No Nonsense added, “We've done a lot as far as with culture building, a lot of team
building. Make sure that everyone understands in order for us to be successful as a school,
this is going to be a collective process.”

Building relationships with students is important to NELA graduates. As was noted by
Principal No Nonsense:

I'm constantly modeling building positive relationships with students. It's nothing to
see me in the hallway constantly greeting students, asking students how their weekend
is. I have certain students that I know because of some things that's going on outside of
the school that I have to make it a point to check in on them.

For example, I have a fifth-grade student who I know Mondays is going to be her
hardest day because of what may have happened over the weekend, do I make sure
Monday morning, I make it a point to go see this student and visit with her and just
check in on her to see how she's doing and make sure her day starts off the right way.

With them seeing me being intentional about building relationships with students, I
think that's also helped the staff to realize that we have to make it a point to build
positive relationships with our students.

Building positive relationships with staff and students builds trust. A culture of trust
empowers teachers to take ownership of the school and the learning process (Fullan, 2001;
Wagner, 2003; Zumba, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).
**Empowering Staff**

The participants have been intentional to empower staff to take ownership of the school and learning process. Principal Turnaround stated:

Last year was really about trying to empower teachers, trying to work through the greenness and the newness of everything. Identifying people whose strengths are my weaknesses and using that team to throw ideas off of, to empower them and say, "Hey, I'll take this on and I'll take that on." I think just that power of being able to build a group of people that you can rely on to help problem-solve and troubleshoot and implement.

Principal Thick-skinned shared, “I feel as though I have increased the voice that teachers have in regards to student achievement. What they think is working for their students. They know that better than anyone does in the classroom.” This principal then made an appeal to the investigator:

...I really try to always include the input of the teachers. You and I both know without that the ship's going to sink anyway because teachers have to really believe in the direction that their school is headed, and they obviously are an integral part of our culture. I think it's very important that their voices heard through the school improvement process.

When teachers feel empowered, they are willing to take risk. Sometimes the risk may not yield the expected outcome. As school leaders reflect on what did not work, it is important to celebrate along the journey.
Celebrate Success

The participants celebrate small successes along the way to keep teachers and students motivated. Principal Focused stated:

I contribute a lot to standard with instructional leadership, and also human resources, celebrate successes with students and staff, that's equally as important. Making sure students and staff are being recognized for things that they have done well. We recognize students here for AR reading, we recognize students for honor roll, perfect attendance, student of the month. We celebrate staff at every staff meeting, send in shout outs. We celebrate staff on our weeks at a glance based on what the institution that we see throughout the course of the previous week, so just making sure we recognize staff and students for the positive things they're doing.

Celebrating successes big and small along the way contributes to a positive school culture. A positive school culture creates an environment of creativity, communication, and collaboration, all which are necessary to improve instructional practices. The research participants have a laser focus on instructional leadership. The next section will discuss NELA graduates’ perception of their role in instructional leadership.

Instructional Leadership

All the participants view themselves as instructional leaders. Through their NELA training research participants recall being put in uncomfortable situations that have led to their success as an instructional leader. Principal Focused shared:

Operation NELA makes you very uncomfortable, but it has attributed to my success as an instructional leader. I know how to handle situations different now because I've
been put on the spot. Operation NELA, that was great, that was a great experience for me, a great learning experience for me.

Principal Supportive added, “We had something that was called Operation NELA. I thought, you would never ever get into those situations, but you do a lot of times. Then you remember the Operation NELA situation and how they responded.”

The research participants shared the importance of being in classrooms each day. They discussed the importance of using data to drive instruction and providing a collaborative environment for teachers to make their work public. Principal Compassionate stated:

Teachers seeing me not just as the principal but the instructional leader, being able to have conversations not just during an evaluation time but all throughout the course of the day. If there are questions … I’m in the classroom every day, not in my office.

Participants ensure the structure is in place to maximize learning. Principal Focused shared:

I don’t consider myself a principal, I consider myself an instructional leader. As an administrator, you have to know what good instruction looks like, you have to know what the teachers are doing, the impact that it has on students.

Principal Compassionate added:

A prime example, if I may give one, is when I was looking at my reading instruction. We only had a 60-minute reading course. When I came in with my master schedule, now it’s built in that reading is 120 minutes, which includes whole group, small group and center time instruction, and writing is a major portion of that. Restructuring the schedule throughout the week. The schedule is set in stone and then it’s not really set in stone because it’s something that has to be tweaked based off of the data.
The participants talked about the value of using data to make decisions. Principal Compassionate commented:

Looking at the data, not just what students are doing in the classroom, but we focus a lot on attendance, on teacher data, getting teachers used to looking at their data instead of just looking at student grades and analyzing that data. When you give an assessment, we go in and we teach them how... I taught them how to analyze and do a complete analysis of what they found and group kids according to strengths and/or weaknesses and starting to build our lessons around those factors, more differentiated and to move into more individualized instruction. That has helped us move our students.

Professional Learning Communities allow time for teachers to collaborate and take a deep dive into the data. Principal Focused reported:

They really didn't have professional learning communities prior to me arriving. They had planning meetings, but they weren't focused around student achievement, they were not focused around data. If you're not assessing the students and using that data to drive instruction, what's the purpose of having planning time? Shifting their mindset of what planning time should be like and having a scripted model of a professional learning community using the before questions to drive that. It attributed to our success...

Principal Turnaround added:

We use PLCs to look at data and use that to guide instruction and to share instructional practices that we expect to see in the classroom...and then as an instructional leader, modeling for staff not just what the best practice is but how to implement it. If I'm
working in a PLC or in a staff meeting, I try to release information or present information in a way that they can present in the same way to their students. I treat them as if they are my classroom and so when I am presenting information, I try to use some of the best practices for engagement for grouping them and so that they can learn from me. Then, I say to them, "What I just did is a way that you can introduce new content to your students." I try to constantly be an instructional model for them.

The NELA principals create an environment and culture in their schools where teachers feel supported. They understand the importance of having effective teachers for all students.

Also, the research participants understand their role, as school leaders, to effectively recruit and retain high quality teachers.

**Human Capital**

Hiring effective staff is one of the most important roles of a principal (Jacob et al., 2012). Overall research participants recognize the importance of having an effective teacher in each classroom in their schools. Their NELA training has provided them the strategies to effectively recruit, retain, and hire effective teachers. They also attribute their NELA training for their realistic view of the lack of teacher candidates available in rural northeastern North Carolina. The research participants have a sense of urgency when searching for teacher participants. In the interview, Principal Driven stated:

> If you can get the right people in the right places, your chances of success are going to be much, much higher. To do it on the recruitment end versus to do it later when you're trying to develop staff, or change mindsets, and change habits. Every time, I'd pick the recruitment end, because I think that's where you can really find great people, and we
were able to find some really great people for this school who are committed to kids, and who really do want to move the school forward. I think hiring practices for any principal, particularly in a rural community, is tremendous, and may be the number one priority. I have been talking to some of my colleagues and saying this spring, we're kind of getting to the place now where it's February, but starting in March, hiring has pretty much got to be the main thing you do, and the main place you put your time and energy. If you don't have great people on board by the time school ends, the chances of you finding them around here in the summer or once August starts is slim to none.

Principal No Nonsense added to this:

With being a low-performance school, a lot of times we have vacancies that go vacant for a while because it's hard to fill those positions, so we know that as a school, we have to do some things to make sure that we are recruiting and retaining the right people as well.

Similarly, Principal Focused shared:

Making sure you have the right people on the seat of the bus, every teacher shouldn't be in a building with students. You have to make sure you have the right people on the bus. If you have people that's on the bus that shouldn't be on the bus, do what's necessary so they will exit the bus.

The research participants have a laser focus on instruction. With this laser focus on instruction comes change in instructional practices and expectations for teacher practices. Research participants are asking teachers to look at instruction differently than how they have viewed instruction in the past. They are requiring a level of collaboration and
communication that did not exist prior to the research participants leading the school. No matter how great the culture in a school, when change occurs there will be some level of resistance. The deeper the change the stronger the resistance (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). The NELA training is essential to building the skillset and knowledge of the NELA graduates to assess and address the human capital resources or the lack thereof in their schools.

**Challenges Faced**

All eight of the research participants indicated staff resistance to change as their biggest challenge. The researcher was not surprised to see the frustration on research participants’ faces and tension in their voices as they shared their experiences of efforts to effectuate change in their schools. This finding concurs with the researcher’s extensive experience in school leadership. She has learned through her experience of guiding schools and districts through the change process that the deeper the change, the stronger the resistance. At the core of change is a level of discomfort. If staff members are comfortable with the current situation, they think, why change? Ill-equipped principals may find it easy to come with excuses of why things cannot get done. Research participants are skillful in garnering the trust of staff to move forward with and through the change process. Principal Focused admitted:

I faced a lot of resistance my first year. People are comfortable, and when you're comfortable you don't get the results you need. I faced a lot of resistance with the staff making things uncomfortable for them, but being they were uncomfortable it attributed to success.
To this, Principal Supportive added:

The kickback of the challenges I faced was, were they [teachers] ready for a change or did they want to keep their school the way that it had been? Going though that change phase was probably our biggest kickback. I say that with, "Why do we have to do this?"

Even when we did team building activities, they didn't really understand the concept of why we're building the house of cards together, what does it make, and can we just play the game? No, we didn't. It was for a purpose of understanding.

I think as adults, we think that sometimes because our time is constricted. That pushback of "She certainly is looking at things a little bit different" or "She's certainly asking us to do things a little bit different." You had those that, "We've always done it this way. In Blue Elementary, we always do it this way." I think that's always the case when you first come in to a school. They were all willing to try after a while. I think that it was built the trust. After the trust was built and they knew that I was here day and night with them whatever it took and that I was right along the side with them, the trust was there.

Principal Buffer shared:

You're always going to I guess going to be a little weary about where the person's coming from. I had to earn their trust. Some of the challenges were just some resistance to some different things that I've tried. Resistance from...the teacher area. Not so much from the parents. That's been probably the extent to where the challenges have come. Just some general resistance to some change...One of the ways in which I had kinda started out this way, but one of the ways that I've learned to manage that is...Starting
with, "Why?" They understand where I'm coming from, "This is why we have to do this." I'll explain it. I'm starting to get more people to buy into the different things that I'm trying because I'm explaining to them, "This is why we have to do this." I use a lot of storytelling, or finding examples of students that have done this or classrooms that have done this, and then going to them...Sometimes you have naysayers, "Well I don't think this is going to work in my classroom." "Well, it worked down the hall in so-and-so's classroom." I'm learning how to cope with those challenges, but most of it has just been some general resistance to trying something new.

In a similar vein, Principal No Nonsense commented:

There were some staff members who were very reluctant to change, but I had to step back and not take it personal and not think that they didn't want the change because of me. What I found was there were some staff members who didn't really see the vision and what we were trying to do. I had to make sure that the vision was clear for them. There were other staff members who just didn't simply have the skill sets. When they felt like, "Mr. No Nonsense, I want to do something, but I'm not quite sure how to do this," they didn't try it, because they felt like they were going to be unsuccessful.

Leading a school with many challenges can be overwhelming. There are many areas to be addressed but attempting to attack all the areas of concern at once, is not doable and probably will not yield the intended outcome. As Principal Driven stated:

I do think that one of the hardest things about being a principal in a low performing school in a rural district, and probably in any low-income area, is that there are so many priorities, and so many things you want to do at any given time.
The ability to identify high leverage priorities and have an intentional approach to addressing the priorities, will yield a higher probability of success. Creating a positive school culture is the overarching practice the candidates attribute to their impact on student achievement. The components of school culture the candidates noted they practice to improve student achievement is creating a positive school culture through building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, addressing instruction, celebrating successes, and leveraging human capital.

It is nice to hear praises for program, but there are always opportunities to improve. With this in mind, the researcher asked research participants what changes could be made to improve the NELA program.

**Recommendations for Improvement of NELA Program**

It’s important for the researcher to disclose a possible bias. The researcher worked for NELA as a Director and Executive Coach at the time of data collection. To control for this bias, the researcher did not make reference to her work or position while interviewing research participants. The NELA program provides many opportunities for feedback from stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement. The NELA staff is feedback receptive to ensure the NELA program remains relevant and up-to-date on the program’s approach to leadership development. To get recommendations to improve the NELA program, the researcher asked participants the following questions:

1. What things do you wish you would have had more of in the NELA program?
2. What things do you wish you would have had in the NELA program?
The theme that emerged from responses to the question of, “What you wish you had more of in NELA?” was budget and finance. Six of the eight research participants named budget and finance as an area for deeper learning and understanding. Research participants felt they understood basic budget and finance but wanted to go deeper into impact on student learning. Principal Compassionate shared her experience of having a budget for an area that is not common to most schools, remarking:

When I came in, I was very abreast of Title 1 and the general funds and I know professional development funds and different things like that. I had a Title 7 program which was different. Knowing that the population… I knew it was Native American, but really knowing that there’s totally a budget there, I came in with the perception of everything was under the same cap and the same umbrella. That was one budget that if I would have known about, knowing that I had Title 7 in the school, I would have asked about that budget. When I found out about it … I had been here for a while and I was never seeing … never thought to ask about it. Just knowing all the various different types of funding that may be within the school.

Principal Focus was aware of the different budget areas in her school but shared she needed additional information on how to use the monies effectively to have impact on student learning. Principal focus shared:

Just managing a budget. It's not so much in the resources, because I think they [NELA] did a great job of going through how to decipher which resources to use. I don't think it's that but just managing a budget, and how to utilize the resources effectively. I'm
thinking in terms of money, not the supplemental resources. Just using the money, the right way.

Principal Supportive shared similar thoughts about budget as Principal Focus. Principal Support communicated that she understands the different budgets that exist and the codes. She wanted additional information on how to effectively use the money to make impact on student academic performance, stating:

Financing would be the aspect of not to understand what codes did what numbers and what just being first to understand that. I think NELA made that pretty clear. I think the financing would be to make sure that with your Title 1, for instance, this is just an example, with you Title 1, are you properly spending your Title 1 money? If you decided to spend it for tutors, what is your purpose behind it, why does that finance fit that?

Principal Turnaround shared similar thoughts about budget as previous comments. She stated:

Work with budget. We had a class on budget and we got to see a Title I budget, but nowhere prepared for the process of what it took to do a comprehensive needs assessment for the school. Create a budget from scratch. Looking at different line items and accounts, and what you could do and possibly couldn't do. So just more work with that and developing budget.

Principal Buffer commended on budgets as well:

Budgets...I don't know how to do this with NELA, the whole finance piece and the whole budgets piece, but that was a big learning curve for me. When I became an
assistant principal, I learned a little but not so much because the principal does have control over those budgets.

Regarding finance, Principal No Nonsense added:

We had a class on this, but I would love to see more with this, dealing with budget and finance. I think it's one of those things, until you actually step into that role, there's going to be some things that you're not going to know until you actually have a chance to work with it. If we can do more with budget and finance, that would be beneficial.

The answer that emerged from responses to the question of, “What things do you wish you would have had in NELA?” was “nothing.” Six of the eight research participants did not have suggestions for additions that need to be included in the NELA program to ensure NELA fellows are prepared to step into the role of principal. Research participants struggled to come up with suggestions. Principal Compassionate shared:

There's really nothing I can think of that I wish I would have had that I didn't have. NELA gave me the confidence to do this, I really don't think, if there wasn't a NELA program, I wouldn't have been an instructional leader today. I really think, I don't think there's anything that I miss that they could have offered that they didn't offer me. The support is ongoing.

Principal Supportive gave a similar response when she stated:

I'm not answering because I feel like I had more than most people. I had more experiences than the average graduate did from an administration point. I had more hands-on experience. I'm talking about in and out of schools, ability to get in and out of schools, hearing speakers, traveling places. Most graduates would have never ever
and do not have that because I speak to other people that I've graduated with administration degree. I know that they have that.

What did not have? I don't know that there's anything that I didn't have that I needed. I was very satisfied with what I received.

Principal Driven had a puzzled look on her face as she repeated the question to herself several times trying to come up with a response. She asked, “Additional things I wish I would have had?” She answered, “Yeah, that wasn't a part at all. I don't know… I don't know. I don't think there's any one thing that I would say we need more of this necessarily.”

Principal Turnaround had a similar reaction and thought process to the question:

I think the things I just...Can you repeat that one more time just so I can get clarity?

(Question repeated by researcher)

Right. (appearing to be deep in thought)

I would just say I speak with people that did not go through the NLA program and they just cannot believe the wealth of experiences that were given to me as a NLA intern.

Principal Buffer struggled with this question as well:

Mmm...There was a lot. I can't imagine more than what was there. I honestly can't think...Of anything, there's some things that I don't know that any program can really prepare people for until you actually get into situations. You can't make some of the stuff up that we have seen...I can't say that there's anything that I didn't have that I wish I did.
Similarly, Principal No Nonsense reflected the views of the other research participants:

Hmm. That's a great question because NELA did so much. NELA covered so much. I'm going to be honest with you, and this might not be the best answer. I can't really think of anything that wasn't offered in NELA that I wish I would have had. Everything we did in NELA, it was very intentional. It was very purposeful. It was designed to better prepare us for leaders. Everything we did, it was beneficial. It was purposeful. I can't think of anything, to be honest with you.

The response from NELA graduates on the impact of the program was overwhelmingly positive. The research participants struggled to find suggestions for improvement for the NELA program.

**Summary of Findings**

This chapter presented student achievement data pre-NELA-trained principals leading the school and post first-year NELA-trained principals leading the school. The schools led by first-year NELA-trained principals saw gains in student proficiency and growth. The student achievement gains of the NELA principals are particularly impressive when you take into account the research on time to turnaround a low-performing school and the effects of a novice principal on student achievement. Research shows it takes approximately two to four years to turnaround a low-performing school, with improvement in school culture occurring the first two years and improvement in student performance starting about the second or third year (Kutash et al., 2010), yet the NELA principals made improvements in student academic performance during their first year. As shown in Figure 4.13, NELA-trained principals continued to see gains in their second year of the principalship.
This chapter also presented the qualitative data, which depicts the experiences and practices school leaders attribute to the change in student academic achievement in their schools. After a careful examination and analysis of the interview transcriptions and document analysis, the following dominant themes emerged:

1. The NELA experience itself and how it impacted their job as a school leader, specifically noted were dispositional attributes in NELA Competencies;
2. How NELA training helped research participants create a positive school culture, specifically emphasis on building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, and celebrating successes;
3. The role instructional leadership plays in their roles as school principals and how NELA adequately prepared them to be effective instructional leaders;
4. The biggest challenge faced when research participants assumed the role of principal in their schools and how their NELA training prepared them to address it.

The research participants attributed their impact on student achievement to their NELA preparation. Specifically, the research participants stated NELA training gave them the confidence to be a principal, the skillset and mindset to be resourceful, and a growth mindset in terms of problem solving. The practices the research participants attributed to their impact on student achievement were creating a positive school culture and instructional leadership. Research participants created a positive school culture through intentionally building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, and celebrating successes. Staff members’ resistance to change was stated by all research participants as their biggest challenge. The research participants attributed their NELA training focused on dispositional attributes to their ability to effectively address the challenge. Namely, research participants’ ability to build trust amongst their staff.

Chapter 5 will present a discussion and interpretation of the findings of this study based on the literature, implications for practice, policy, and future research as well as the researcher’s conclusions drawn from the study.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this case study was two-fold: (a) to examine the impact of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates on academic performance of students through the review of existing student performance data; and (b) to better understand the experiences, standards, and practices NELA-trained principals attribute to the change in school performance. The following research questions guided the current study:

1. What is the school performance over a three-year span prior to NELA graduates leading the schools?
2. What is the school performance while under the leadership of NELA graduates?
3. What experiences, standards, and practices do NELA fellows attribute to the change in school performance, if there are any?

This research was intended to reveal implications for Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) delivering Masters of School Administration (MSA) programs, local education agencies (LEA) and education policy makers. This chapter provides a summary of the findings from Chapter 4. Also, this chapter provides discussion of the review of existing data pre-post NELA-trained principal to determine the impact, if any, on student academic performance. In addition, this chapter provides discussion of the themes, how the themes relate to the literature, and the experiences and practices NELA graduates attribute to their impact on student academic achievement. After this, the researcher’s conclusions are shared along with implications for practice, policy, and future research.
The Problem

While there is an abundance of historical information on the evolving role of the principal, there is far less historical documentation for principal preparation. According to Levine (2005), the traditional university-based Master’s program that prepares the majority of principals is, at best, inadequate and appalling. At a time when leadership is most critical, there is a shortage of school leaders prepared to lead low-achieving schools.

Discussion and Findings

The researcher sought to compare three years of student achievement data prior to the NELA-trained principal taking on the principalship, to that of the student achievement data while under the leadership of the NELA-trained principal. However, the lack of a concordance table to compare testing data from the prior North Carolina standards testing results to that of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) testing results made it difficult for the researcher to make a comparison. To that end, the researcher used testing results post Common Core implementation. This study found that student academic performance in five of the six (83%) schools increased during the research participants’ first year as principal in their schools. Of the five schools that had gains, four of the schools gained more than 15 percentage points. This gain could be described as “dramatic”. The NELA-trained principals continued to see an increase in student academic performance during their second year as principal.

As cited in Chapter 2, school leadership is critical to improving educational outcomes for students; however, there is a nationwide shortage of highly skilled school leaders willing to take on leadership roles in historically low-performing schools (Darling-Hammond et al.,
Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) state that the problem is not a shortage of certified administrators, but a shortage of well qualified administrators willing to take on schools in underserved communities where working conditions are most challenging. NELA-trained principals serve in some of the state’s most challenging schools. All eight schools in the study are “high poverty schools” as identified by the Title 1 designation. The majority of the schools in the study have free and reduced lunch (FRL) rates above 80%, with two schools having FRL rates above 90%. Six of the schools in the study has a majority African American population, one school has a majority American Indian population, and one school has a majority Caucasian population. Leading in high-poverty, high-minority schools is a common theme amongst the participants of this study, with the exception of Brown Elementary. Winter, Rinehart, and Muñoz (2002) state that a candidate’s self-perception of his or her ability to do the job of school principal is the strongest predictor of his or her willingness to apply for a position in school leadership (Winter, Rinehart, and 2002). The participants felt they were well-prepared to take on the challenges of the high-needs schools they lead.

The participants of the study ranged in ages between 30 and 54, and all eight had previous teaching experience. However, their route to teacher certification varied. Four participants went through a teacher education program, three of the participants took the lateral entry route, and one study participant took the Teach for America route. All eight participants had less than three years of experience as a principal at the time of the study. It is often noted, to turnaround schools identified as low-performing, districts must seek out principals with a proven track record of leading in challenging situations. However, the
participants of this study saw gains in student academic performance in their first year of the principalship. They attributed their “NELA experience” for preparing them to do the work of school principal and giving them confidence in their ability to lead in the state’s most challenging schools. As cited in Chapter 1, NELA grounds its work in the following research-based principles (Application for UCEA Award, 2011). Effective principals:

a. Lead by modeling exemplar values and behavior;

b. Help make possible what they require others to do;

c. Establish agreement on the school’s purpose and goals and then create processes that help employees learn what they need to meet these goals;

d. Select, reward, and retain teachers/staff who are willing to work to achieve school goals;

e. Are leaders of learning in the school (there is a laser-like focus on academic achievement and all decisions and resources are aligned to the goal of improving student outcomes) and establishes a sense of urgency;

f. Develop the staff and cultivate a culture of continuous, reflective professional learning (by both individuals and groups/PLCs) that is transparent and a collective good;

g. Cultivate shared leadership so that authority and accountability are linked;

h. Are systems-thinkers and are able to frame problems and potential problems by being reflective practitioners;
i. Utilize a systems level understanding of the interconnectedness of barriers to student achievement and are able to identify leverage points within the system to push change efforts that improve school outcomes;

j. Understand, read, predict, and prevent challenges to a positive school climate;

k. Use multiple forms of data to inform all decisions; and

l. Understand that a central aim of their work is creation of a socially just school organization and student learning process so that all students can be academically successful.

The emerging themes from the interviews provide information on how the NELA-trained principals put into practice their NELA training.

Instructional leadership is key to turning around the poor performance in a school (DeVita et al., 2007). Research participants view themselves as instructional leaders. As instructional leaders, participants perceive themselves as teachers. They repeatedly shared being in classrooms as a critical function of their role to support staff and students. The participants “roll up their sleeves” and work side-by-side with teachers in the classroom. They lead by modeling the expectation. Participants created a collaborative environment for teachers to make their work public and the structure to maximize learning. Study participants accredited their NELA training for instilling in them the importance to help make possible what they require others to do. In their role as instructional leaders, the NELA-trained principals define the school’s mission, manages curriculum and instructions, and promote a positive school culture (Hallinger, Murphy, Weil, Mesa, & Mitman, 1983; Marzano et al., 2005).
Effective school leaders create a culture of high expectations around teaching and learning in their buildings (Kutash et al., 2010; Manna, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005). Reeves (2006) states:

The greatest impediment to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what they actually do. Staff members are not seduced by a leader's claim of “collaborative culture” when every meeting is a series of lectures, announcements, and warnings. Claims about a “culture of high expectations” are undermined when school policies encourage good grades for poor student work. The “culture of respect” is undermined by every imperious, demanding, or angry e-mail and voice mail coming from the principal. Leaders speak most clearly with their actions. When staff members hear the call for transformation from a leader whose personal actions remain unchanged, their hope turns to cynicism. (p. 6)

Participants of this study attributed their ability to create a positive school culture to the rise in student academic performance in their schools. They created a positive culture by empowering their teachers. Principal Supportive’s comment sums up the thought for most research participants. She stated:

When I first came…we had a disjointed culture. People did not feel united. We did not have a united front. We did not have a united school. That was the first thing I built, a community of leaders. The community of understanding.

Research participants stressed the importance of getting the culture right in their schools. They created a positive school culture by focusing on; building relationships with staff and students, empowering teachers, and celebrating successes.
NELA-trained principals had to make changes in their schools while at the same time build relationships with their staff. They attributed their ability to build relationships with their staff by establishing trust. They accredited gaining trust of their staff as a key factor in student achievement gains. They gained the trust of their staff by modeling the behaviors they said as school leaders they value. The trust was cultivated by listening to all of the voices, treating everyone as a knowledgeable professional, keeping their word, and celebrating successes (Ramsey, 2008). Effective school leaders have the ability to build relationships with staff and students to move forward with their vision (DeVita et al., 2007; Marzano et al., 2005). Participants shared that teachers are willing to take risk and try a new approach when they feel supported (Peterson & Deal, 1999; Ramsey, 2008). Participants shared that students will go the extra mile when they know you care.

A principal’s impact on student achievement is primarily through their influence on teachers (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Michlin, & Mascall, 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). “Principals who are strong, effective, responsive leaders help to inspire and enhance the abilities of their teachers and other school staff to do excellent work” (Manna, 2015, p. 15). Participants of this study were intentional to empower staff to take ownership of the school and learning process. They empowered staff by increasing the staff’s voice in decisions of the school and instructional program. The participants reported they identified the teachers as the experts in their classroom, and these NELA-trained principals sought instructional strategies from their staff and reviewed data with them as a team.

Participants of this study celebrated small successes along the way to keep teachers and students motivated (Marzano et al., 2005). Steiner, Hassel, Hassel, and Valsing (2008)
suggests that celebrating early wins is one of three most important turnaround actions of school leaders. They state, “Identify and focus on a few early wins with big payoffs, and use that early success to gain momentum” (Steiner et al., 2008). Research participants identified how students and teachers are recognized in their schools. Principal Focused stated:

…making sure students and staff are being recognized for things that they have done well. We recognize students here for AR reading, we recognize students for honor roll, perfect attendance, student of the month. We celebrate staff at every staff meeting, send in shout outs. We celebrate staff on our weeks at a glance. We make sure students and staff are being recognized for things that they have done well.

Research participants understand the importance of recognizing the positive contributions of students and staff.

Hiring effective staff is one of the most important roles of a principal. Overall research participants recognize the importance of having an effective teacher in each classroom in their schools. Cheney, Garrett, and Holleran (2010) stated:

…the principal is the best-positioned person in every school to ensure successive years of quality teaching for each child. Exemplary principals establish a climate that values effective teaching and ensures that the most promising teachers are selected, all teachers are developed and recognized, and those teachers who are not doing well by children are released. It is the combination of highly effective teaching with highly capable school leadership that will change outcomes for children in our schools—not one or the other but both.
The research participants stated their NELA training provided them with the strategies to effectively recruit, retain, and hire effective teachers. They also attribute their NELA training for their realistic view of the lack of teacher candidates available in rural northeastern North Carolina.

Participants of this study faced challenges as they sought to improve student academic outcomes in their schools. Among them, were increasing educational opportunities for students in their buildings, which required the adults to make changes in their instructional practice. Study participants shared the challenges they faced in their efforts to effectuate change in their schools. The theme that emerged as the greatest challenge faced by the NELA-trained principals was resistance to change. All eight research participants indicated staff resistance to change as their biggest challenge. To turnaround schools identified as low-performing, change is inevitable. Turnaround leaders must quickly stop practices that are not aligned with the vision (Steiner et al., 2008). Steiner et al. (2008) state, “When turnaround leaders implement an action plan, change is mandatory, not optional” (p. 6). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) stated, “The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be… (p. 2).” The sustainability of change depends on having school staff internalize the change itself (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). School leaders must inspire change in the behaviors and attitudes of staff members in a way that is considerably different than what staff members are accustomed to previously (Steiner et al., 2008).

NELA implements a continuous feedback loop as one of the many ways the program ensures it is meeting the needs of the districts. In an attempt to address areas that participants
felt NELA could improve upon, the researcher asked them, “What things do you wish you would have had in the NELA program?” The participants struggled to think of areas of improvement for the NELA program. As cited in chapter 4, the following two responses were typical of all research participants. Principal Driven paused, while looking down, she repeated the question that was asked by the investigator, “Additional things I wish I would have had?” After another long pause, Principal Driven stated, “Yeah, that wasn’t part at all. I don’t know…” Principal Turnaround had a similar response, “I think the things I just… Can you repeat that one more time so I can get clarity?” The researcher repeated the question. Principal Turnaround, looking toward the investigator in deep thought stated, “Right.” The investigator rephrased to question to give “think time” to the research participant. Principal Turnaround could not think of an area that was missing from the NELA program.

Study participants shared their recommendations for improvement of the NELA program. Overall, research participants were pleased with the acquired knowledge, skills, and experiences they received through their NELA training and had confidence they could have a positive impact in leading a school. The theme centered on recommendations for improvement of the NELA program was, **nothing is missing** from the NELA program. Based on my experience as a school principal, first year principals don’t always know what they don’t know. As the novice principals gain experience, they may have additional thoughts on how they were prepared as school leaders.

The researcher wanted to see if there were areas being taught in the NELA program that needed improvement. The researcher asked participants, “What did you have in the NELA program but wanted more of?” The overwhelming response from participants was a
more in-depth understanding of the **impact of school finance and budget** to support the instructional program. Research participants felt they have an understanding of basic budget and finance but wanted a deeper understanding of how to maximize the use of their budget to have the greatest impact on student learning. Six of the eight research participants named budget and finance as an area for deeper understanding in the NELA program. Participants stated budget management as an area of need. They were comfortable with their knowledge of knowing the budget codes but wanted a deeper understanding of how to use budget to make impact on academic performance. It is important to note that NELA through its continuous feedback loop, recognized the need for change in the budget piece. The change was made with the next cohort of NELA fellows.

**Implications of the Research**

Based on the findings of this study, several implications emerged for practice, policy, and future research. The implications are determined from the experiences, standards, and practices participants shared as helping them become successful school leaders that is supported by the review of their school data.

**Researcher Challenges**

This research study focused on NELA-trained principals leading in elementary schools. The researcher had to reschedule three of the interviews due to inclement weather. The schools were on a two-hour delay due to icy road conditions. The researcher knew from her experience as a school principal that the principals would have difficulty focusing on the interview questions due to the attention they needed to pay to getting students off the buses,
ensuring students were served breakfast, and changing of the schedule. As a researcher, it is important to keep your finger on the pulse of the school.

Another challenge faced by the researcher was the ability to determine the effectiveness of the principals due to the spring to spring testing cycle in use in North Carolina. A testing cycle of this nature means that summer learning loss is a factor that should be considered as potentially impacting student achievement and its impact is negative. Summer learning loss, also called summer brain drain has a significant impact on the achievement gap. The Oxford Learning Website (2015) provide statistics on summer learning loss:

- 2.6 months of math skills lost over the summer;
- 1 month of overall learning is lost after summer vacation;
- 6 weeks in fall are spent re-learning old material to make up for summer learning loss;
- 2 months of reading skills are lost over the summer;
- As early as grade one, summer learning loss can be recognized;
- By the end of grade six, students who have experienced summer learning loss over the years are an average of 2 years behind their peers;
- 2/3 of the income-based achievement gap is attributed to summer learning loss by the start of high school; and
- It takes up to 2 months from the first day of school for a student’s brain development to get back on track.
These statistics indicate that a fall to fall testing cycle could potentially give the researcher the ability to gain a more accurate indication of student growth.

Based on the findings of this study, several implications emerged for practice, policy, and future research. The implications are determined from the experiences, standards, and practices participants shared as helping them become successful school leaders that is supported by the review of their school data.

*Implications for Practice*

Based on existing published research, data from this study, and the researcher’s experience in the field; all three together informed the recommendations made to improve principal preparation.

**Institutions of Higher Education (IHE).** For some IHEs, the redesign of principal preparation is a paradigm shift from “candidate as consumer” to “district as consumer,” with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement (Klostermann, Pareja, Hart, White, & Huynh, 2015). Some IHEs are resistant to change (Tozer, 2016). Some university policies and practices are in direct conflict of the change that needs to occur in principal preparation programs (Mendels, 2016). Research from this study supports these assertions from researchers. NELA is an alternative licensure program that also grants a Master of School Administration (MSA) degree to program completers. In many ways, the existence of an alternative licensure program being housed at a land-grant university is illustrative of the fact that there are real and /or perceived barriers to delivering a high-quality program within the current state context. Both oversight of MSA programs from the state of North Carolina and
barriers from within the university system both contributed to the need for NC State University to develop an alternative path.

**Recommendation 1. Have districts take the lead on establishing strong University-district partnerships.** Mendels (2016) states, “strong university-district partnerships are essential to high-quality preparation but are far from universal (p. 5)”.

University-district partnerships are essential but in some cases insufficient. It is important to note that there may be challenges at the onset of the district-university partnership. Based on the researcher’s experience, some districts may not have a clear picture of the profile of an effective principal for their district. In the absence of leadership tracking data, some districts are playing the “wait and see” game. Let’s wait to see how students perform on test to determine if a principal is effective. If districts are not clear of their needs, they don’t make very insightful partners. Also, some districts suffer from “group-think”, this is the way we do things here. The researcher has found in her experience that sometimes districts want to see change in their district, but in the current environment and culture. The researcher is not negating the importance of a district-university partnership, but rather urging the partners have intentional interactions and communication to build a strong partnership. Further, the districts need to take the lead in developing the partnerships, and comprehensive talent management plans, since they are the ultimate consumers of the leaders the IHEs produce.

Hitt, Tucker, and Young (2016) assert:

> Preparation programs that critically examine their own practices and continually strive for improvements in recruitment, selection, and program content and delivery better position themselves to improve the quality of aspiring educational leaders, and
ultimately outcomes for schools and students. Preparation programs working in tandem with school districts, however, have the greatest potential to create and enrich a seamless pipeline of better prepared and successful educational leaders. (p. 12)

North Carolina General Statute 115C-296.11 mandates that, “Educator preparation programs shall establish and maintain collaborative, formalized partnerships” with local school districts. However, local school districts are best positioned to establish and maintain university-district partnerships. Orr, King, and LaPointe (2010) state, school districts, as the direct “consumers” of program graduates, are strategically positioned to exercise meaningful influence over the content and design of program practices (p. 1). Based on the researcher’s experience as a former principal and area superintendent, she agrees with Orr et al. (2010) that the onus of building university-district partnerships should be placed on the local school district. This level of expectation empowers local school districts to take ownership of their leadership development and allows for a direct path to provide input in principal preparation to ensure the programs are meeting the needs of the district. Orr et al. (2010) argue:

School districts need to recognize their power as the consumers of principal preparation program graduates, and the resulting influence they can wield in shaping these programs. By behaving as consumers, districts can improve the quality of program candidates and graduates, increase the number of qualified candidates for leadership positions, and ensure that program curricula address district needs. (p. 6)

The NELA program has meaningful partnerships with participating districts. The NELA staff communicate with superintendents of participating districts throughout the program for feedback for program improvement, internship field experience support, and
needs of the district. This partnership allows NELA to stay abreast of the changing role of the principalship and the needs of the school district.

**Recommendation 2. Implementation of a leadership tracking system.** IHE need data on the performance of their graduates in order to engage in continuing program improvement efforts. Currently, IHEs lack ready access to such data. One solution to getting feedback to programs on the performance of their graduates would be to develop a leadership tracking system that follows leaders from preservice through their professional practice. The Wallace Foundation is currently supporting the development of such systems through its University Principal Preparation Initiative. Local school districts are best positioned to ensure leadership data are collected and tracked in such a way to inform leadership development in the school district and the principal preparation program (Briggs et al., 2013; Cheney et al., 2010; Manna, 2015). The university-district partnership in recommendation 1 should lend itself to the local school district sharing the data with the universities.

The Bush Institute, in its attempt to evaluate principal preparation programs had difficulty gathering data on principals, their assignments, and their experiences (AIR, 2016). A 2016 AIR report, suggests school districts should collect and analyze data that helps them understand where their best leaders are trained, when a leader may need additional support and resources, and how to keep the best leaders in a district” (p. 6). The university-district partnership should allow for a continuous flow of data between the district and the university. The flow of data will assist universities in developing longitudinal data sets to drive program improvements and better prepare future school leaders. The challenge with collecting and tracking high volumes of data is having a robust system that school districts and universities
can use to manage the data. Participants in The Wallace Pipeline Grant have built innovative databases to collect and store longitudinal information about the training, qualifications and performance of their principals and aspiring principals (Gill, 2016).

**Recommendation 3. IHE should have a rigorous selection process.** The IHE should have a rigorous selection process that identifies candidates that ideally are recommended by school district leaders (Grossman, 2011). Candidates for the NELA program typically have the approval of their school principal and the superintendent of the school district. However, there have been candidates “picked” by the NELA program and not endorsed by the district. One of the participants in this study was “picked” by the NELA program. Based on the school performance, the hand-picked participant is an effective principal. The participating school superintendents and principals are aware of the needs of their district and staff members who show promise as future school leaders. This coupled with their understanding of NELA’s rigorous selection process and the NELA program structure, allows school principals and superintendents to make informed decisions on endorsement of potential candidates for the NELA program.

**Recommendation 4. Principal preparation programs should have robust, authentic field-based internships with skilled supervision** (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Aspiring principals should have the opportunity to participate in an internship experience that is grounded in the real-world context of the principalship. A component of Illinois’ statewide redesign (Klostermann et al., 2015) required programs to include:

A performance-based internship that enables the candidate to be exposed to and to participate in a variety of school leadership situations in settings that represent diverse
economic and cultural conditions and involve interaction with various members of the school community. (p. 6)

The strong partnerships NELA has with schools and districts, supports quality field-based learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

The NELA Principal Residency gives NELA Fellows a full academic year of in-close field experience with an expert Principal Mentor (https://nela.ced.ncsu.edu/). The NELA program, in partnership with district superintendents determine internship placement for NELA Fellows. Prior to conversations with district leaders about placement, NELA staff develops a school profile for each school in the district. The school profile includes; previous years’ data points, school characteristics, and principal background. This intentional approach to the selection of the internship site and principal mentor is another layer of assurance that NELA Fellows will be assigned to principal mentors that model the desired leadership behaviors and know how to develop and guide interns to meet the standards for NC School Executives (Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2005). Once the intern site and principal mentor is selected, the NELA program provides an orientation session (training) for the principal mentors, district leaders, leadership coaches, and principal interns to ensure there is a clear understanding of the role each will play during the internship experience. The program provides each orientation participant access to the NELA internship manual to define the expectations, processes, and schedule of the internship (Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2005).

Local Education Agencies (LEA). LEAs should take the lead in establishing and cultivating partnerships with universities that prepare aspiring leaders for their district. The
university-district partnerships can ensure principal preparation programs are meeting the needs of the districts. Klostermann et al. (2015) states:

> While district partnerships vary in the level of district involvement, from participating in dialogues with programs about district needs and concerns to sharing the design and monitoring of internship experiences, this role requires district interest, resources, and capacity. (p 42)

District and school leaders should communicate regularly with principal preparation programs to identify strong teacher leaders as potential candidates for principal preparation programs (Briggs et al., 2013; Cheney et al., 2010; Grossman, 2011; Manna, 2015). They should communicate to share data and any other information that can help address the needs of the school district (Briggs et al., 2013; Cheney et al., 2010; Grossman, 2011; Manna, 2015). Also, school districts should provide on-going support to graduates through professional development and ongoing coaching to help them grow on the job (Cheney et al., 2010).

**Local school boards.** Local school boards should work in collaboration with the district superintendent to hire principals using competency-based hiring. Steiner and Hassel (2011) state, “competencies refer to the underlying motives and habits—patterns of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking—that cause a person to be successful in a specific job or role (p 4). Hiring managers in the business sector are moving toward a competency-based hiring model versus the traditional job description and interview structure to avoid the “fake it until they make it” new hires (Peregrin, 2014). With the important role school principals play in a
school’s success, school districts must be able to discern if potential candidates have the skills, knowledge, and behaviors to positively impact the school.

Local school boards should ensure that both the policies and practices within the school district provides on-going support for principals. Most importantly, they should prioritize providing resources for district leadership to ensure ongoing support for new leaders once they assume leadership roles in schools.

**Practicing Principals**

**Recommendation 1.** Model Expectations. The greatest barrier to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what they actually do (Reeves, 2006). All study participants identified staff resistance as their biggest challenge. The participants could overcome this challenge by modeling their expectation. The participants “rolled up their sleeves” and modeled building relationships during their interactions with students throughout the day. The participants shared they support staff through participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Participants described their interactions with students and staff as being “all-in.”

**Recommendation 2.** Empower teachers and staff. Participants stated they were intentional to empower staff to take ownership of the school and learning process. A principal’s impact on student achievement is primarily through their influence on teachers (Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). Participants indicated they increased the voice that teachers have in regards to student achievement by viewing teachers as the experts of their classroom.
Implications for Policy

Principals play a key role in keeping schools operational and safe, building productive school culture, support teachers and teaching, and ensure state initiatives succeed (Briggs et al., 2013; Cheney et al., 2010; Manna, 2015). However, principals are low on the policy agenda (Briggs et al., 2013; Manna, 2015). State policymakers should leverage their positions to ensure excellent principals who advance teaching and learning for all students are at the helm of all schools, particularly the neediest schools.

Manna (2015) states, “Principals merit a more prominent place on state education policy agendas because of their powerful and singular role in improving education school-wide.” To ensure there are great schools to meet the needs of all students, state leaders should use the levers available to cultivate and support excellent principals.

Recommendation. States should implement fall to spring testing cycle to gain a more accurate understanding of student growth. Figure 5.1: Reading Achievement Trajectory gives a visual of the impact of summer on student performance. As cited in Chapter 4, Entwisle et al. (2001) developed the “faucet theory” to explain the summer learning loss phenomenon. The “faucet theory” states, when school is in session, the school resource faucet is on and children of every economic background benefit roughly equally. When school is not in session, such as summer vacation, the school resource faucet is turned off. When the school resource faucet is turned off, reading proficiency among children from more economically advantaged families continued to develop, whereas economically disadvantage children’s achievement reached a plateau or even fell back during the summer months (Entwisle et al.,
Thus, making a spring to spring measure of student growth difficult to capture the actual achievement growth of students.

Heyns (1987) argues student academic gains made during the school year must be “sustained” to be real. Fall to spring testing would provide a more accurate picture of student growth during the school year. Figure 5.1 displays the need for summer academic support for low-income students. The additional supports provide an opportunity to sustain academic gains during the summer months.

*Implications for Future Research*

**Replicated studies.** This study may be replicated to focus on NELA graduates at the middle school and high school level to determine their impact on student academic
achievement in their schools and get their perspective on the experiences, standards, and practices they attribute to the change in school performance, if there are any.

**Quantitative study.** NELA has graduated four cohorts of students through the preparation program. Each NELA cohort has approximately twenty students. Which means, approximately eighty aspiring school leaders have graduated from the NELA program. It would be interesting to conduct a quantitative research study to determine if there is statistical significance in the improvement of school performance under a first-year NELA-trained principal versus that of traditionally trained principals.

**Continued impact.** The first NELA cohort graduated in 2012. As NELA graduates continue to gain experience, a future study to determine continued or sustained impact of NELA graduates on student academic performance will be helpful to determine supports needed once graduates are in the role of school leader.

**Teacher satisfaction.** Is the rise in student performance linked to teacher satisfaction? The researcher has done extensive work with schools identified as low-performing. Typically, when there is a change in leadership and different expectations of staff, the ratings are low for the school leadership standard of the Teacher Working Conditions (TWC) survey. As student performance increase, the school leadership ratings increase. It would be interesting to see if this pattern is present amongst NELA-trained school principals.

**Route to teacher certification.** Participants in this study had varied routes to teacher certification. It would be interesting to explore if the route to teacher certification has an impact on effectiveness as a school leader. Among the routes to include, are: Teach for
America alumni, lateral entry, or traditional trained teachers. The Leadership Tracking System that is in development, could be utilized to address this question.

Conclusion

Principals are the key ingredient to ensuring educational opportunities and success for students. Principals are second only to teachers in their impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). The researcher understands the impact of principals on student academic achievement. She was interested in researching specifically, the impact of NELA trained principals on student academic performance. After a review of the data and interviewing the research participants, the researcher in the current study concludes:

1. First-year NELA-trained principals participating in this study were highly effective in improving student academic performance in the challenging elementary schools they lead. The majority exceeded the 10-percentage point gain that was stated by Marzano et al. (2005) as an indication of an effective principal.

2. NELA-trained principals are confident in their abilities to lead in challenging schools. The researcher believes that NELA-trained principals have the skillset, knowledge, and disposition to effectuate positive change in their schools’ culture, that yields a positive teaching and learning environment for teachers and students. NELA-trained principals have high-expectations for themselves and others in their buildings.

3. NELA-trained principals have a “toolbox” of resources to help them continue to grow once they are in the role of school principal. The cohort model provides the ability to build deep meaningful relationships with their peers, principal coaches, and NELA
staff. NELA principals pull on these resources after they have graduated from the NELA program.

Although there are limitations to this study, the research provides much needed insight into key components to an effective principal preparation program. While the review of the data was exploratory, the data seems to indicate that NELA-trained principals made an impact on student academic achievement in their schools.
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Fusarelli, B. (2009). *Application to UCEA for model principal preparation program* [Handout].

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Murphy, J., & Schiller, J. (1992) *Transforming America’s schools: An administrators’ call to action*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court.


North Carolina General Statute § 115C-105.37A


_History of Education Review, 44_(1).


ENDNOTES

1 Turquoise Elementary is a K-2 school, which does not have tested grades. Therefore, the data used for Turquoise Elementary is from the school it feeds into with a third grade and receives the largest portion of its students.

2 The school was not in existence during the 2010-2011 school year.

3 Principal moved to another school in the district at the end of 2013-2014 school year.

4 * The data used for Turquoise Elementary is from the school it feeds into.

5 ** Denotes that the school was not in existence during the year represented.

6 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

7 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

8 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

9 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

10 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

11 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.
12 The total number of teachers in this school and the average number of teachers in schools with similar grade ranges at the district and state level.

13 Operation NELA is a form of role-play that allows aspiring leaders to practice high stress real school situations in a safe environment for feedback and growth.
Appendix A: Email Request for Study Participation

Dear XX (Potential Participant’s Name):

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership at North Carolina State University (NCSU). For my dissertation, I plan to conduct a phenomenological multi-case study of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates’ impact on student academic performance in elementary schools. As, an elementary school principal who is a graduate of NELA, I am requesting your participation in a 30-minute individual interview to determine what you, as the principal, determine as the main causes of the changes in student academic performance at your school.

I understand your time is valuable and as an instructional leader you are very busy. However, your 30-minute contribution should help provide a better understanding of the practices of Northeast Leadership Academy graduates in their role as principals of rural, high-poverty schools. It is my hope that this study will help inform policy, school district leaders, and schools of education on principal preparation reform.

Your participation in the research study is completely voluntary. If you are willing to participate, please send me an email to catherine_edmonds@ncsu.edu by December 18, 2016 indicating your willingness to participate in the research study. While your information will remain confidential and I will use pseudonyms in writing the report for my dissertation, I cannot guarantee that the information you provide will remain anonymous – you may be identifiable from the responses you provide or from the data on your school performance results that could be used to link your school to you.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this proposed research, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email at XXX@ncsu.edu or Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, my NCSU dissertation committee chair, XXX-XXX-XXXX or email at XXX@ncsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Catherine Edmonds
Doctoral Candidate
North Carolina State University
Appendix B: Principal Interview Protocol

Script: Greeting of the day. Before we begin, is it okay to record this interview session and take some notes? I would like to thank you for participating in this research study about Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates’ impact on student achievement. I would like to share that I am in graduate school at North Carolina State University, working toward a doctorate in Educational Leadership. We don’t know a lot now about the practices of school leaders that move the needle on student academic performance in rural, high-needs schools. Improving the performance of any school is difficult, it is particularly challenging in rural, high-needs schools. Research shows that effective school leadership is key to addressing failing schools. This research study has the potential to inform principal practices that drive significant improvement in school performance in rural, high-needs schools.

You will not be identified by name in the report of my findings. Since you signed the Inform Consent, you know you may stop with the interview at any time or decline to comment on any question you choose. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

1. To what do you attribute the change in student academic performance in your school?

2. What were your actions as the school leader that influenced the areas you shared in question one?

3. Did you face challenges implementing strategies to address the areas you shared in question one? If yes, what were the challenges you faced?

4. What actions did you take to overcome these challenges?

5. Is there any other information you would like to share with me about your impact on student achievement in your school that I may not have asked?

6. What do you believe are the most important things you learned in the NELA program that should continue to be taught to future fellows?

7. What things do you wish you would have had more of in the NELA program?

8. What things do you wish you would have had in the NELA program?

9. Is there any other information you would like to share with me about your experience in the NELA program that I may not have asked?

Script: Thank you for talking with me. Should you think of anything else, here’s my email address
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research
A Case Study Analysis of Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) Graduates’ Impact on Student Achievement in Five Elementary Schools

Description of the research and your participation
You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Catherine Edmonds. The purpose of this research is to analyze student academic performance in five elementary schools led by Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) graduates.

Your voluntary participation will involve:
- Responding to email from the researcher your willingness to participate in the study.
- Working with the researcher through email to schedule a date, time, and place for interview.
- Signing a consent form for participation in the research study.
- Participating in a 30-minute interview with open-ended questions. With your permission, we would like to audio record the interview.

Risks and discomforts
There is minimal risk associated with this research. No sensitive information will be requested.

Potential benefits
We don't know a lot now about the practices of school leaders that move the needle on student academic performance in rural, high-needs schools. Improving the performance of any school is difficult, it is particularly challenging to implement and succeed in school turnaround at schools in rural areas (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). Research shows that effective school leadership is the key to addressing failing schools. The very minimal risk associated with this research is outweighed by the potential to improve principal performance and turn around our neediest schools. Data from this study has the potential to help drive significant improvement in school performance in rural, high-needs schools.

The study should contribute to schools of education's understanding of key leverage points in principal preparation to support low-performing rural schools. The results could help inform principal policy decisions at the school district and state level.

Protection of confidentiality
We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Participants could possibly be identified indirectly from the data collected, because of the small sample size and the fact that school performance is a public record that could be tied back to the participant. However, given the similarity of all five schools (student demographics, location, and school size), it will be difficult to easily identify individual schools.

Data will be reported in both aggregate and individual terms as single cases with cross case comparison. Direct quotes may be used. Identities will be protected through the use of pseudo names. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication resulting from this study. Data from the individual interviews will be digital audio recorded, transcribed, and stored on a password protected computer. All recordings will be destroyed three years after the study is completed.
**Voluntary participation**
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

**Voluntary recording of the interview**
I agree to be audiotaped during the 30-minute interview. Data from the individual interviews will be digital audio recorded, transcribed, and stored on a password protected computer. All recordings will be destroyed three years after the study is completed.

**Contact information**
If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact me at 919-691-1873 or email at catherine_edmonds@ncsu.edu or Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, my NCSU dissertation committee chair, 919-631-2026 or email at bonnie_fusarelli@ncsu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the NCSU Institutional Review Board at (919) 515-4514.

**Consent**
I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this study.

Participant’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________

A copy of this consent form should be given to you.
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Name_______________________________________

1. Identify your gender ___Female ___Male

2. Identify your ethnicity ___African-American ___Caucasian ___Hispanic ___Other

3. Age ______

4. City, State where you grew up____________________________________________________

5. Identify the type of community where you grew up ___ Rural ___Urban ___ Suburban

6. Married ___Yes ___No

7. Identify number of children ___0 ___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___

8. Years in education ______

9. Years as a principal ______

10. Position(s) held prior to becoming a principal

__________________________________________________________________________

11. Years at current school________

12. Years in current district________

13. College/University where you received your undergraduate degree

__________________________________________________________________________

14. Is the College/University where you received your undergraduate degree a Historically

Black College or University (HBCU)? ___Yes ___No

15. Are you first generation college? ___Yes ___No

16. Identify whether your parent(s) were educators ___one ___both ___neither
17. Identify your path to becoming a teacher

   a. Teacher education program

   b. Lateral Entry – hired to teach with a bachelor’s degree in teaching, have three years to complete requirements for teacher license

   c. Licensure only – already held a bachelor’s degree, completed course work for teaching license

   d. Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)

   e. Alternate Program (i.e. NC Teach)

   f. Teach for America

   g. Not Applicable

18. Identify organizations you are involved in by indicating the amount of time involved per month

   ______sorority/fraternity ______civic ______church ______volunteer ______other (include name)
Appendix E: Comparison of Blue Elementary to District Elementary Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary School (Research Participant)</th>
<th>Comparison School</th>
<th>Title I</th>
<th>FRL 2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year (%)</th>
<th>2014-2015 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2014 to 2015 Year (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>+18.2</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>+7.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>97.18%</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>+9.6</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>+3.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>+7.3</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>+11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>90.26%</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>+13.9</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>+2.3</td>
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### Appendix F: Comparison of Yellow Elementary to District Elementary Schools

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<th>Comparison School</th>
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<th>FRL 2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>FRL 2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year (%)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>+16.4</td>
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<td>School 1</td>
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<td>School 2</td>
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<td>86.15%</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
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<td>18.9</td>
<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
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<td>94.17%</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>+8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
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<td>100.00%</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>+6.6</td>
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Appendix G: Comparison of Brown Elementary to District Elementary Schools

<table>
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<th>Elementary School (Research Participant)</th>
<th>Comparison School</th>
<th>Title 1</th>
<th>FRL 2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year (%)</th>
<th>2014-2015 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2014 to 2015 Year (%)</th>
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<td>Brown</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>44.15%</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>74.52%</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>+14.9</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>77.40%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>+0.7</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>School 3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>74.75%</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>55.72%</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>+20.6</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>79.17%</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>+9.4</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>68.32%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>+12.3</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 7</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>77.49%</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>+8.1</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 8</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>45.82%</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>+8.5</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>+0.5</td>
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Appendix H: Comparison of Magenta and Pink Elementary to District Elementary Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary School (Research Participant)</th>
<th>Comparison School</th>
<th>Title 1</th>
<th>FRL 2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year (%)</th>
<th>2014-2015 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2014 to 2015 Year (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magenta</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>+33.5</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>+15.8</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>+4.4</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>+9.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>18.8</td>
<td>+5.5</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>+10.1</td>
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<td>School 3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>+11.4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+8.3</td>
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<td>School 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>+11.8</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>+24.6</td>
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Appendix I: Comparison of Turquoise Elementary to District Elementary Schools

<table>
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<th>Elementary School (Research Participant)</th>
<th>Comparison School</th>
<th>Title 1</th>
<th>FRL 2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>FRL 2013-2014 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2013 to 2014 Year (%)</th>
<th>FRL 2014-2015 (%)</th>
<th>Change 2014 to 2015 Year (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>72.60%</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>+8.4</td>
<td>43.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>82.63%</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>+16.2</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>+0.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>95.66%</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>+13.6</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>-5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
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<td>78.40%</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>+11.2</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
</tr>
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<td>School 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>92.89%</td>
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<td>45.1</td>
<td>+13</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>+1.9</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>55.13%</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>+19.5</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>+9.5</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>+4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 7</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>68.25%</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>+8.4</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 8</td>
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<td>82.93%</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>36.5</td>
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<td>26.2</td>
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<td>School 9</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>90.25%</td>
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<td>33.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 10</td>
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<td>62.80%</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>+9.9</td>
<td>48.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 11</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>40.4</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>+9.6</td>
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