

STRATEGIES EFFECTIVE TURNAROUND PRINCIPALS USE TO  
IMPROVE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE RATINGS UNDER  
THE TEXAS A-F ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

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School accountability has been a focus for state and federal legislators for over 50 years. In 2017, Texas passed House Bill 22 to align their accountability system with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. This piece of legislation gives every Texas public school a letter grade based on state assessment scores, attendance, and other factors. Schools that received a D or F, or schools that need to improve the scores of certain subpopulations, were identified as in need of targeted support. Further, these schools needed to make immediate changes to improve their state assessment scores and improve their letter grade. This exploratory phenomenological qualitative study explored how six school principals leading schools in need of targeted support made changes to their school's culture and expectations to improve student achievement scores. Data were drawn from six individual school principal interviews and were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Thirteen themes emerged from the data analysis: principal self-efficacy, shared mission and vision, hiring practices, collegial relationships, parents and community support, teacher capacity and efficacy, professional learning communities, expectations of teachers, mentoring and onboarding, campus-level support, parent support, student behavior, and teacher motivation and support. The findings from this study can inform district and campus leaders of the behaviors and practices utilized by campus principals to make rapid and dramatic changes in their schools to improve educational conditions for their students.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Throughout previous (Improving America’s Schools Act, 1994, and No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act, 2002) and current (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015) legislation and the accountability reform eras that followed, inundated by standardized assessment supported by federal, state, and local policy, states continue to be charged with the urgent need to work with districts and schools in their efforts to determine the best way to improve educational outcomes for students. Public schools continue to face enormous pressure to provide opportunities so students can achieve; however, some schools are struggling to promote effective practices, retain high-quality teachers, and improve outcomes for students. In the face of daunting standardized assessment requirements and threats to remove federal and state funding, the need for turnaround school leadership arises (Hamilton et al., 2014). According to Reitzug and Kappler Hewitt (2017), the goal of turnaround schools is to “rapidly and significantly improve the test scores of persistently low-achieving schools” (p. 492) by changing the principal and implementing new instructional programs on the campus.

What does it take to turn around a school that is judged to be ineffective and make it better for the students who are attending the school? Due to demands for urgency and quick action, turnaround principals are known for their ability to make immediate and wholesale changes to a campus to improve educational opportunities for students. By employing specific leadership styles and characteristics, improving a campus culture, and supporting an environment of collective and self-efficacy, several turnaround principals have been able to make sudden and dramatic changes to a school determined by the state to be ineffective (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2019; Hitt & Player, 2019; Hitt et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019).

## Statement of the Problem

Education is primarily a function of the state. However, the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 expanded federal control of education through federal funding. Some presidents continued to reauthorize or modify the act while others changed federal legislation and placed additional requirements on schools that received federal funding; thus, federal reach continues to expand to state and local education agencies (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). In 2015, President Barack Obama signed ESSA into effect, requiring states to establish accountability systems to identify schools that need comprehensive support to improve achievement opportunities, as well as schools that have “sustained equity gaps” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016, p. 24); these schools often receive a grade of D or F, thus labeling them as in need of improvement and offering the perception that, in their current state, they are ineffective. In response to the passage of the ESSA (2015), the Texas 85<sup>th</sup> Legislature passed House Bill 22 ([HB22], 2017). This policy provided each school district and campus an overall campus rating of A, B, C, D, or F, based on measures using state assessment data. The policy was designed to identify and support ineffective schools and school districts to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2014; Texas Education Agency, 2017). Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as the ineffective label makes hiring decisions, culture development, and collegial relationships more difficult to develop and sustain (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015).

HB22 (2017) created a divide between effective and ineffective public schools. Nearly 7200 schools in Texas qualify for Title I funding with over 4400 of those schools are elementary schools. Further, data from 2019 showed that 544 schools in Texas needed comprehensive improvements and 2564 schools were identified as schools in need of targeted improvement. The

data also showed that nearly 350 of schools in need of comprehensive improvements were elementary schools and over 1600 schools were identified as in need of targeted support and were struggling to maintain their current letter grade (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Unfortunately, many schools deemed ineffective or in need of comprehensive or targeted support by the A-F system serve large populations of students from low-income and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with 77% of elementary schools in need of comprehensive improvements and 89% of elementary schools in need of targeted support. These concerns directly and indirectly affecting students, families, and communities (Hamilton et al., 2014; Pazez et al., 2015; Texas Education Agency, 2019). Further, ineffective labels on schools lead to decreased student performance, increased teacher turnover, a lack of efficacy across the campus, and pressure from local, state, and federal levels (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Therefore, the problem of practice for this study is to understand the characteristics, practices, and effectiveness of turnaround principals under Texas's A-F accountability system.

Previous studies examined turnaround principals (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2019; Hitt & Player, 2019; Hitt et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019), but no research was discovered pertaining to the function of a turnaround principal under Texas's A-F accountability system. Further, limited research has been conducted to examine the sustainability of turnaround practices. Coupled with the responsibility of providing each student with an equitable educational opportunity to succeed, increasing federal regulations creates a need to understand how effective turnaround principals improve ineffective schools. The additional pressure of potentially losing federal funding, the threat of state education agency takeover, and potential job loss imparts a sense of urgency unseen and unfelt by many principals. Therefore, this study was designed to identify and understand the characteristics of successful turnaround principals and

how they improve hiring decisions, culture development, and collegial development on a campus, with the eventual goal of improving student achievement opportunities for all students.

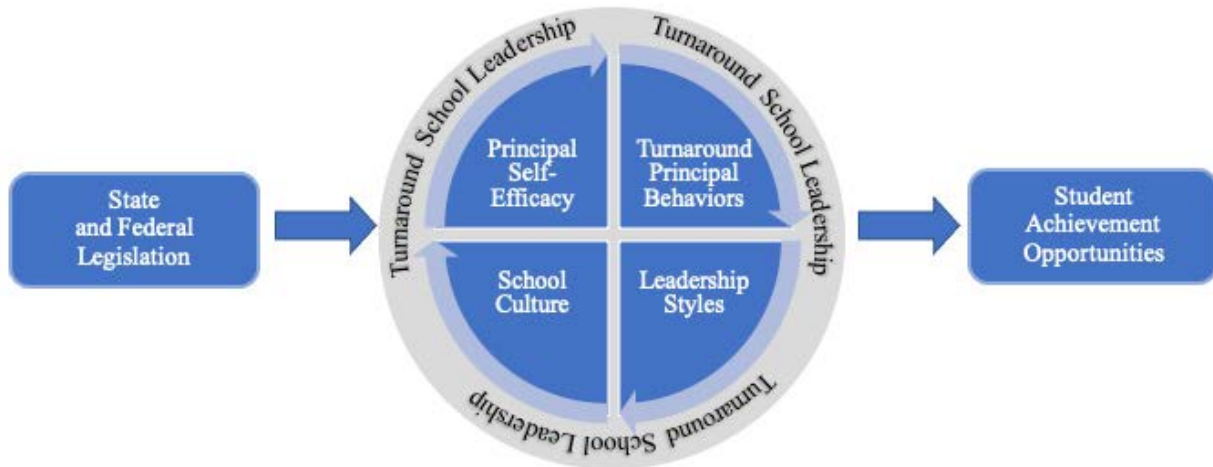
### Conceptual Framework

State and federal legislation continues to influence district and campus leadership behaviors, as school districts must follow policies and expectations to continue to receive funding from these sources. While these regulatory systems are intended to identify struggling campuses to ensure states and districts can provide needed support, the actual effects are that ineffective schools are labeled as such, causing campus leaders to struggle to retain high-quality educators and supportive families. The ineffective labeling coupled with teacher and family retention exacerbates systemic inequalities that have affected students from low-income and minority-rich backgrounds for generations (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lareau, 2000; Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). The unfortunate consequence is a school with campus leadership and staff who are ill-equipped to handle the struggles, needs, and issues facing students attending ineffective schools. Thus, the need for immediate and comprehensive change arises.

The impact of an effective principal can dramatically alter the achievement opportunities at a school and help mitigate systemic inequalities that plague students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Turnaround principals possess the skills to improve educational opportunities and mitigate systemic inequalities with a sense of urgency. By developing a shared mission and vision, improving hiring practices, and creating opportunities for collegial relationships, teachers and students can get the support they need, thus impacting student achievement. Figure 1 displays the conceptual framework for this study and includes the four constructs turnaround school leaders utilize to promote student achievement opportunities at their school.

Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework*



*Note.* This conceptual framework indicates the relationship between state and federal legislation, turnaround school leadership, and student achievement opportunities.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand which turnaround leadership behaviors and practices were exhibited at studied campuses and which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable, long-term educational opportunities for all students. In this study, I investigated how school leaders at campuses identified as in need of targeted support were applying various leadership styles, influencing school culture, and impacting efficacy. I observed if the principals were implementing turnaround principal behavior.

### Methodology and Research Questions

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological qualitative study was to explore whether turnaround leadership behaviors were in use at the studied failing or struggling campuses and which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable long-term educational opportunities for all students. Six campus principals were interviewed to determine their

perceptions of the practices employed at their specific campuses that were identified as ineffective by TEA's accountability system or were struggling to maintain their current grade assignment. The selected six elementary principals had been at their campuses for five or fewer years. The goal of focusing on those six principals was to gain deeper insight into the efforts, success, and areas of growth needed to replicate and reform turnaround efforts at struggling or failing schools.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are principals' perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?
2. To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?
3. What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?

### Significance and Relevance of the Study

In an era where accountability, high-stakes testing, and achievement results impact the work of schools, school district-level leaders, campus principals, and teachers all strive to improve and expound on the work that will provide the most return. At a failing or struggling campus where teacher turnover is high, student achievement is low, and staff members are struggling to meet student needs, principals who utilize the same practices they have always used will struggle to improve the work at the campus. Thus, turnaround principals employ various leadership styles, improve school culture, and promote efficacious behaviors to help improve student achievement opportunities (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2019; Hitt & Player, 2019; Hitt et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019). The goal of this study was to extend this research to determine how these practices are utilized in the context of Texas HB22 (2017), as well as to determine leaders' perceptions of their abilities, practices, and characteristics that

could lead to improved student achievement outcomes at schools deemed ineffective and in need of improvement or are struggling to maintain their current letter grade. Further, the findings generated from this research may help district leaders identify campus principals who exhibit turnaround leadership behaviors who can make immediate and wholesale improvements at struggling campuses. Finally, the findings of this research study have the potential to improve academic outcomes for students attending struggling and failing campuses.

### Delimitations

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) noted the importance of identifying delimitations related to researcher choices. First, only elementary schools that have an F-rating or need targeted support, based on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test, were included. These schools had been deemed in need of improvement to improve or were working to maintain their current state-assigned grade. Additionally, as one of the determinants of how the state assigns grade scores, the STAAR test has limitations, as it is used to rank and compare students and schools. Further, research has shown that the same types of students are successful (those who are White and affluent) and the same types of students do poorly (those who are non-White and poor). Thus, the system for determining a school's success is fundamentally flawed (Barlowe & Cook, 2016; Tanner, 2016).

In addition, only elementary schools were the focus of this study due to the foundational skills that are introduced and reinforced in those grade levels. I limited the study to elementary schools because they are the starting grounds for the school to prison pipeline, which refers to the “growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions...and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice system” (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). The types of students who often find their way into that pipeline are typically the same

students who attend schools deemed ineffective, those who are mostly African American and Hispanic students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Elias, 2013).

Additionally, this study was limited to a three-month period for data collection and analysis. Participants for all phases of the study were from an average-sized suburban school district in north Texas. Principal participants had different background experiences and levels of experience in education overall, as a principal, and more specifically, a turnaround principal. The purpose of these delimitations was to determine which turnaround leadership behaviors were employed and most effective in improving student achievement opportunities.

### Assumptions

I acknowledge the existence of several assumptions made regarding this study. Because participants understood that they were not required to participate and could opt-out at any time, it was assumed that they would answer all semi-structured interview questions openly and honestly. Another assumption was that students performed to the best of their ability on the STAAR assessment, which is used to determine a school's accountability rating and to determine leadership effectiveness. Finally, it was assumed that the participant sample used in this research would be representative of other Texas schools in need of improvement, as based on HB22 requirements.

### Definition of Terms

The following key terms are used throughout the study. To ensure clarity and consistency, they are defined to fit within the context of the study.

- *Collective efficacy*. The “sense among group members that they have the capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to achieve their most important goals” (Goddard et al., 2017, p. 1).



- *Culture*. The “norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape members’ decisions and practices” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, para. 15).
- *Distributed leadership*. A leadership style characterized by the distribution of campus responsibilities, collaborating to create and establish an instructional culture, empowering teachers to take on formal and informal leadership responsibilities, and encouraging teachers’ professional growth (Hallinger et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016)
- *Efficacy*. The “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).
- *Instructional leadership*. A leadership style that focuses primarily on establishing school goals, observing instruction, improving teacher quality, managing schoolwide curriculum, and monitoring student achievement (Boyce & Bowers, 2017; Hallinger, 1984; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Murphy, 1988; Shaked, 2020).
- *Self-efficacy beliefs*. The “product of a complex process of self-persuasion that relies on cognitive processing of diverse sources of efficacy information conveyed enactively [sic], vicariously, socially, and psychologically” (Bandura, 1993, p. 145).
- *Targeted support*. Used to “identify campuses that have consistently underperforming student groups” (Texas Education Agency, 2020a, p. 2). Schools in need of targeted support have one or more student groups that do not meet state-level targets for three consecutive years (Texas Education Agency, 2020a).
- *Transformational leadership*. A leadership style that focuses on fulfilling a clear mission and vision, the achievement of students and teachers, and the development of a culture of success and achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Thomas et al., 2020).
- *Turnaround principal*. A leader who “generate[s] rapid and dramatic change in

schools to reverse the continuation of adverse effects on students” (Hitt et al., 2019, p. 191).

### Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, the conceptual framework, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, and definition of key terms. Chapter 2 provides a review of existing literature on the following topics: (a) legislative policies that have required standardized assessments and created Texas’s state accountability system; (b) how leadership behavior styles impact student achievement and how principals can develop school culture through the implementation of a shared mission and vision, improved hiring practices, and opportunities for the development of collegial relationships; (c) the impact achievement has on efficacy, as well as the effect that efficacy has on student achievement; (d) the different practices that turnaround leaders must employ to make immediate changes at a campus in need of improvement and (e) the effectiveness of turnaround policies and practices in other states and districts in the United States. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, the population and sample information, and data collection procedures, including focus group and individual interviews, as well as procedures for analyzing the data. Chapter 4 presents the findings discovered through this study and the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the research findings, a discussion of the findings, implications for current and future practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

### Summary

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological qualitative study was to determine which turnaround leadership behaviors were exhibited in failing campuses and which behaviors could be replicated to provide equitable educational opportunities for students. This chapter

outlines the purpose of the study, the conceptual framework, and the research questions that guided this study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature related to this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Public education is intended to provide learning opportunities for all students.

Unfortunately, outside factors influence students and their achievement in school. One of the most influential factors affecting students throughout their formal education is socioeconomic status (SES). The significance of a student's SES has substantial effects on their opportunities in school and beyond high school graduation (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2011). Additionally, students from low-SES backgrounds often attend schools deemed ineffective or learn from ineffective or inexperienced educators, thus creating an ever-widening opportunity gap for these students.

State and federal legislation are designed to encourage schools to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students through positive and negative reinforcements. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA], 2015), the federal government returned the responsibility back to the states for educating the student populace. The underlying message of this responsibility expectation stemmed from the belief that states needed to create and sustain a state accountability system that would identify schools needing resources, supports, and interventions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). In compliance with ESSA, Texas created and passed House Bill 22 ([HB22], 2017), implementing an A-F accountability system for schools across the state. Schools scoring A, B, or C are considered in compliance with HB22 (2017) in preparing students for college, career, and military readiness. Schools rated D or F require improvement and are given a limited timeline to make changes to improve their score before the Texas Education Agency (TEA) intervenes and makes necessary changes. Additionally, schools with achievement gaps within subpopulations are also required to narrow and close the gaps before needing

targeted or comprehensive support from local, regional, or state education agencies (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

To ensure compliance with HB22 (2017) and provide equitable learning opportunities for students from low-income backgrounds, campus and district leaders must identify effective leadership practices to establish school culture, retain high-quality educators, and develop staff capacity. Staffing changes may be necessary for schools and districts not meeting the Texas Education Agency's expectations for college, career, and military readiness preparation, including the implementation of turnaround principals at struggling or ineffective campuses (Reitzug & Kappler Hewitt, 2017).

This review of the literature related to turnaround principals and equitable learning opportunities first examines the history, development, and implications of leadership styles in education. Next, an analysis of the impact of principal leadership behaviors on school culture development is provided. The effects of principal self-efficacy are discussed as related to turnaround principals. Finally, the research surrounding turnaround principal leadership is examined.

### Leadership Styles

Campus leadership has a substantial impact on the effectiveness of a school. While teacher quality is the most important influence on student learning, campus leadership is the second most important influence on student achievement (Day et al., 2016). Principals employing specific leadership characteristics and styles tend to be more effective in helping teachers develop instructional capacity and increasing student achievement opportunities (Hallinger et al., 2020; Hitt & Player, 2019; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Additionally, principals utilize various leadership styles and characteristics based on context;

thus, the school's social and economic composition, teacher experience, and academic situation all impact a principal's leadership style and approach (Printy & Liu, 2020). Researchers have identified a multitude of leadership characteristics and categorized them into several distinct groups. By employing these leadership style characteristics, principals can keep a finger on the pulse of the school and call on leaders throughout the campus to help initiate changes when necessary. Typically, the identified changes are selected to ensure that student achievement and the school's vision remain at the heart of all decisions. The focus of this section of the literature is on instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributive leadership.

### Instructional Leadership

There is significant evidence of the instructional leader's impact on teacher retention, school culture and climate, teacher satisfaction, and teacher autonomy (Boyce & Bowers, 2017). Additionally, these factors combine to create conditions that have the potential to improve student achievement opportunities (Shatzer et al., 2014; Shaked, 2020). Instructional leadership practices were identified in the 1980s and focused on the principal establishing school goals, observing instruction, improving teacher quality, managing the curriculum, and monitoring student achievement (Boyce & Bowers, 2017; Hallinger, 1984; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Murphy, 1988; Shaked, 2020). According to Hallinger (1984), principals were expected to be "knowledgeable about the curriculum and instruction and able to intervene directly with teachers in making instructional improvements" (para. 13). Additionally, principals subscribing to instructional leadership practices establish a culture of learning for both the educator and the student (Boyce & Bowers, 2017; Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Effective schools are characterized to have leaders who have a clear mission and vision and have instructional leadership qualities. The instructional leader's goal is to support the teaching and learning of students, with the ultimate

goal of student achievement. Researchers have found that instructional leadership practices support other school factors, such as teacher efficacy and teaching practices (Goddard et al., 2017; Hallinger et al., 2020; Hitt & Player, 2019; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).

According to Hattie (2008), teachers and teaching quality represent the most influential school-related factors in student achievement. Since the early 2000s, researchers have noted that the principal's role in instructional leadership has shifted. Principals have moved from being the sole decision-makers on the campus to including teachers and staff in the decision-making process. Principals provide guidance and nurture teachers to become instructional leaders in their classrooms and the school, developing a culture of shared practices throughout the campus (Shaked, 2020). Shared practices encourage collaboration and shared responsibility among the school staff. For example, effective principals share decisions regarding students with school and district staff and involve the community in the decision-making process. By incorporating these and other shared practices into how they work with others, the role of the principal as an instructional leader is evolving into a transformative leadership approach (Marks & Printy, 2003; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).

### Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership practices gained traction in the 1990s, as leaders started to pull away from an exclusive focus on instructional practices. Transformational leadership encourages campus administrators to “create a school culture that inspires and motivates educators to collaboratively improve organizational performance” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 535). Principals who employ transformational leadership practices are focused on fulfilling a clear mission, the achievement of students and teachers, and the development of a culture of success and achievement. Additionally, leaders who utilize transformational leadership practices use the

school environment and relationships among teachers to solicit and support change through a strong school culture, collegial relationships, and shared power and responsibility (Copland, 2003; Day et al., 2016; Freeman & Fields, 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; Thomas et al., 2020).

When transformational leadership practices were first identified, researchers found that principals still applied instructional traditional leadership practices while focusing on the motivations of teachers, parents, and students to create a culture of collaboration and drive achievement. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their staffs to believe in the campus mission and collectively strive to reach their goals. Transformational leaders also use others' strengths to help solve problems, build capacity among teachers and staff, and develop teachers to grow into instructional leaders on the campus. In addition, transformational leaders provide individual and group support, build and strengthen school culture, and set high academic expectations for staff and students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Thomas et al., 2020).

Transformational leaders use various means for creating and sustaining change on a campus. They tend to be helpful and supportive, allowing teachers and staff to work in cohesive groups to solve problems while the principal facilitates the discussion. Allowing teachers and staff to take the lead in solving problems serves as the most direct way to contribute to staff decision making. Teachers and staff develop autonomy based on the amount of support and feedback they received in the past from the leadership team and their colleagues, as well as the time that was spent developing the relationships necessary to make decisions. In certain situations, principals may apply pressure to teachers to change using frequent and direct communication to ensure teachers fulfill their responsibilities to the staff and their students



(Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Thomas et al., 2020). Some researchers contend that principals who apply such pressure are utilizing a top-down approach, precipitated by policies imposed by federal and state officials. Leaders, in response, wind up transferring that pressure to the teachers (Bush, 2017). It should be noted, however, that principals who apply such pressure do not meet the characteristics of transformational leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

### Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership, also known as shared or integrated leadership, emerged in the early 2000s. Leaders began to employ characteristics of both instructional and transformational leadership practices. Distributed leadership involves the distribution of responsibilities instead of the top-down structure that is typically utilized by leaders (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Hallinger et al., 2020; Shatzer et al., 2014). Principals who engage in distributed leadership practices encourage teachers and staff to collaborate and share with one another, which helps to create and establish an instructional culture (Copland, 2003; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Printy & Liu, 2020). Additionally, they support teachers when they begin to take the initiative and accept responsibility for the learning environment, empower teachers to take on formal and informal leadership responsibilities, and encourage teachers' professional growth (Marks & Printy, 2003).

An essential component of distributed leadership is that principals must release responsibility to teachers to grow as instructional leaders in the classroom and school. Further, teachers must accept the responsibility of becoming instructional leaders, thus creating a reciprocal relationship between teacher and principal. If the release and acceptance of responsibility does not occur, distributed leadership cannot happen (Printy & Liu, 2020). The currency of distributed leadership “lies in the personal resources of participants and is deployed through interaction” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 375) between the principal and teachers. Because

of the effect that an effective teacher can have on a student's achievement opportunities, principals must be intentional about engaging teachers in curriculum and instruction conversations, preserving instructional time, and supporting students and teachers' success. Increased engagement between the teacher and school leaders in a supportive and connected way improves teacher collective efficacy, collegial relationships, quality of instruction, and student achievement (Hitt & Player, 2019; Printy & Liu, 2020).

Distributed leadership places emphasis on different characteristics of transformational leadership and instructional leadership. Leaders must establish a shared mission and vision, provide collegial structures to support teachers, and develop leadership capacity with the teachers and staff. Further, leaders must focus on curriculum and instruction, observe teachers to improve instructional practices, and ensure teachers are developing as instructional leaders in the classroom (Marks & Printy, 2003). Thus, school culture is an essential component of distributed leadership, as the school culture influences how much responsibility is to be shared (Copland, 2003; Printy & Liu, 2020).

Leadership styles affect every element of a school as teachers and leaders play a significant role in student achievement opportunities. Principals utilize various leadership characteristics based on the district, campus, and stakeholders who engage with the school. Thus, leaders must establish a school culture that allows teachers and staff to develop the capacity to utilize instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership characteristics as students, staff, and situations change.

### School Culture

The development of culture is an important component of school and district leadership. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) defined school culture as the "norms, values, beliefs, and

assumptions that shape members' decisions and practices" (para. 15). Creating and developing a school culture is an intentional process. It should be noted that leaders strongly influence a school's culture, including teacher and staff attitudes, collegial relationships, and student achievement (Copland, 2003; Goddard et al., 2017; Shatzer et al., 2014). The process of creating a school culture requires the involvement of leaders who, in collaboration with others, develop a set of shared values. These values, then, are held by all members of the school organization, including district and campus leaders, teachers and staff, students, and community members.

### Shared Mission and Vision

A strong, shared mission and vision are essential to creating significant school reform (Hitt & Player, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Transformational leadership inspires teachers and staff members to look beyond their own needs and motivations to meet the organization's goals. Additionally, transformational leaders motivate teachers and staff to build support around the purpose of the campus goals. They keep the mission and vision at the forefront of all campus-level decisions (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Thomas et al., 2020).

Researchers have identified mission and vision characteristics that impact student achievement. One aspect is holding students to an expectation of high achievement, regardless of social or familial concerns (Day et al., 2016). Copland (2003) noted that teachers can develop strong relationships with outside stakeholders and communicate the mission and vision effectively and in understandable terms. Thus, teachers are a conduit between the mission and vision and families.

Another practice is to set high but attainable goals for students, teachers, and the school to encourage growth from multiple stakeholders within the school. Establishing goals requires effective communication from the campus administrator and opportunities to attain and restate

the vision (Freeman & Fields, 2020; Hitt & Player, 2019). Pham et al. (2020) observed, however, that incremental increases in expectations are insufficient, and a sweeping, campus-wide mission and vision can help increase achievement opportunities for all.

Working conditions can influence the success of staff members and students on campus. Because working conditions are a concern at schools serving large populations of economically disadvantaged and minoritized students, creating and sustaining a mission and vision that improves the social conditions for the staff, such as school and teacher leadership, and access to high-quality resources and managing student behavior concerns can improve student achievement and increase teacher retention on a campus (Redding & Henry, 2019).

### Hiring Practices

Hiring practices are among most influential factors in a principal's leadership is his or her hiring practices. A principal endeavors to hire teachers who fit well within the school's culture and the team with whom they will be working. In Brown and Wynn's (2009) study on principals, a key factor noted by all principals was the value of students' education at the school. Effective principals indicated that teachers who fit the school's culture need to have a passion for influencing students' lives through education. Additionally, the findings of that study showed that a teacher must have the needed drive to continuously improve student achievement year after year.

Students attending urban schools, however, are more likely to be taught by inexperienced and under-qualified teachers than their White, middle-class counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Redding & Henry, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). In contrast, Thomas et al. (2020) identified two job attitudes that lead to teacher retention and student success. The first is an intrinsic motivation to teach. Teachers who have this attitude regarding teaching genuinely enjoy

teaching and the process of student learning. The second attitude is organizational commitment, where a teacher is committed to the school and district mission and vision and the development of collegial relationships that drive student success. A principal's ability to recruit and retain highly effective teachers and staff strongly correlates to student success (Hitt & Player, 2019). Thus, when hiring, campus and district leaders should look for candidates who are able to persevere through challenges. This hiring principle is especially applicable to urban schools with large populations of racial and ethnic minorities and low-income students. Hiring strong teacher candidates who can handle the challenges of working in an urban school will likely increase teacher retention and impact student achievement opportunities.

### Collegial Relationships

Collegial relationships help develop traction for meeting school and organizational goals. Thus, campus administrators should create enthusiasm and opportunities for group success to garner support for achieving the school's mission and providing opportunities for student, teacher, and school success (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). Collaborative relationships can also help teachers encounter the challenging work of instructing students and increasing opportunities for rigorous activities and discussions to improve educational opportunities for all. A positive school culture promotes care and trust among the staff as they strive to reach federal, state, and local educational goals (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Copland, 2003; Hitt & Player, 2019; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).

The intentional creation of formal structures for new and veteran teachers increases collaboration and trust among colleagues. To ensure that collaboration is possible and that trust among the group can be established, the principal, as the instructional leader of the campus,

should be intentional about the creation of grade-level teams, subject-level teams, and professional learning communities (Copland, 2003; Hitt & Player, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Because of the social aspect of education, teachers need the support of collegial relationships to “learn from peers, solve problems together, and hold one another accountable” (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 27), especially in urban schools where student needs can be greater than their middle-class counterparts (Simon & Johnson, 2015).

The development of collegial relationships can be costly in terms of time and resources. Campus and district leaders should prepare to dedicate time during the school day to allow teachers to collaborate and develop relationships to create collegial and trusting relationships with one another. Many campus administrators have encouraged collaborative relationships by scheduling common and sacred planning time into the school day (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Moore Johnson, 2015). Viewing common planning time as a sacred necessity enables teachers to build relationships with one another organically. These types of relationships can save time in the future, as collaborative groups work to solve problems and establish opportunities for students to succeed. Additionally, collegial relationships can help a teacher feel supported, develop efficacy, and encourage the teacher to stay at the campus (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Moore Johnson, 2015; Redding & Henry, 2019; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Collegial relationships also support teacher self-efficacy. Leaders who provide opportunities for trusting relationships to develop allow teachers to build confidence in their capacity as educators and impact student achievement. Campus and district leaders can also increase organizational learning through a meaningful and shared mission and vision, opportunities to deepen knowledge and understanding in collaborative meetings, and allow

teachers to express personal and professional opinions (Charner-Laird, 2017; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Additionally, collaborative relationships enable teachers to take responsibility and ownership of the collective group rather than their own students or learning (Charner-Laird, 2017; Copland, 2003; Hitt & Player, 2019; Moore Johnson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). Teacher self-efficacy is also a strong indicator of teacher retention, which helps sustain strong collegial relationships.

Conversely, some teachers struggle to work in collaborative groups for a variety of reasons. Although district and campus officials have expanded collaborative expectations, evidence shows that some teams were found to “function as a collection of individuals rather than as a collective of professionals” (Charner-Laird et al., 2017, p. 556). Additionally, when teachers are forced to meet with no agenda or plan, little to no evidence of improved student achievement resulted. In one study, Charner-Laird et al. (2017) discovered that forced collaboration can be met with resistance, causing rifts in the culture and climate of the campus, especially if teachers do not see the value in meeting.

### Principal Collective and Self-Efficacy

Effective principals working in urban schools are essential to student and teacher success. Because inexperienced teachers teach many students from low-income and minoritized backgrounds, effective principals can mitigate ineffective practices by creating and sharing a clear mission and vision, improving hiring practices, and developing opportunities for collegial relationships to grow (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Nevertheless, this work can be difficult for principals, as they must utilize high levels of perseverance and resilience to ensure continuous growth and development on behalf of the teachers and improved opportunities for students (Goddard et al., 2017). Bandura (1993) researched the effects of efficacy to understand the levels

of achievement for individuals, recognizing that there is an evident and marked difference between “possessing knowledge and skills and being able to use them well under taxing situations” (p. 119). Leading a school can be difficult and requires principals to utilize their knowledge and skills under taxing situations. However, a turnaround principal employs a strong sense of efficacy when working in challenging situations, such as schools that serve large populations of minoritized and economically disadvantaged students. Four characteristics influence an educator’s efficacy beliefs: conception of ability, social comparison influences, feedback, and perceived controllability (Bandura, 1993).

### Conception of Ability

One of the essential components of efficacy is the conception of ability. Bandura (1993) observed that individuals who believe that challenges provide learning and growth opportunities tend to face challenges more frequently and are more confident in their abilities. Additionally, these individuals do not judge their achievement and success by comparing themselves to others. Instead, principals with a strong conception of ability are confident in their skills and consider achievement based on their growth.

Conception of ability is also influenced by the collective efficacy of a campus, leadership cohort, or district. Leaders who distribute the responsibility of educating students from all social and racial backgrounds possess high levels of efficacy, as they can depend on others to persist in the face of adversity, share a multitude of ideas, and share the burden of responsibility that comes with leading a struggling campus. Additionally, collective efficacy helps educators in their pursuit of closing educational gaps and meeting campus and district goals (Goddard et al., 2017).



## Social Comparison Influences

Social comparisons allow leaders to compare their progress to their colleagues, helping to derive satisfaction and develop self-esteem. Social comparison can have positive or negative influences on a leader. Social comparisons can undermine efficacy, increase erratic thinking, and impair performance (Bandura, 1993). However, social comparison, in terms of collective efficacy, has converse effects, as learning communities lean on one another to develop creative ideas to solve classroom or campus problems. Additionally, well-established professional learning communities are built on trust and collegial relationships. Thus, social comparison can inspire teachers and leaders to work together to solve seemingly unsolvable problems. Collective efficacy also takes the burden of responsibility away from the campus principal. It also allows teachers to take on more of the responsibility of implementing classroom structures and effective lessons. Thus, campus and district leaders are viewed more as partners than heroes (Copland, 2003; Goddard et al., 2017; Marks & Printy, 2003). Thus, leaders must establish a culture that utilizes the positive influences of social comparison to drive achievement and success for students and staff.

## Feedback

Another component of efficacy is a feedback cycle. Because goal attainment is often gradual, individuals rely on feedback to ensure their progress toward the goal is appropriate (Bandura, 1993). School leaders take input from their staff members, superiors, community members, and students to help measure progress toward school and district goals. Further, when leaders focus on improving the instructional realm, teachers and leaders work together as a professional learning community to improve instruction, increase effective behaviors, and create opportunities for students to succeed in the classroom (Goddard et al., 2017).

## Perceived Controllability

Perceived controllability is an aspect of efficacy that encompasses an individual's ability to control the environment. Those who perceive high control of their environment have an increased sense of efficacy, whereas individuals who believe they have limited control exhibit a lower sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1993). Collective efficacy beliefs also serve to support and influence the behavior of others by encouraging some behaviors and discouraging others. Leaders who have a high sense of efficacy can use their position to influence behaviors; leaders who release some of the responsibility of transforming an ineffective campus allow others to encourage effective behaviors and modify unproductive behaviors (Goddard et al., 2017).

## A Theory of Action for School Turnaround and Turnaround Principals

Turnaround reforms enacted by turnaround principals are based on a theory of action that has three critical stages. The first stage is the campus leader's ability to disrupt and remove barriers to improvement, including improving hiring practices, implementing opportunities for trust to develop, and moving or removing ineffective teachers (Copland, 2003; Redding & Henry, 2019). This stage is often tumultuous, and staff members can resist the rapid changes that occur, which can detract from potential positive changes for students and staff members (Pham et al., 2020). Leadership becomes more centralized during this stage, as new leadership structures emerge, and staff members identify their role in the new system (Copland, 2003).

The second step in the turnaround theory of action is implementing an improvement infrastructure, including improving stakeholder buy-in. Principals working to enhance the campus infrastructure tend to seek professional development opportunities, leadership capabilities, and trusting relationships among the staff. Distributing leadership among the staff is a central tenant to changing the campus culture and implementing schoolwide restructuring.

Further, turnaround principals include parents in decision-making processes and seek support to ensure families have the necessary resources to support their students at home. Finally, implementing routines and procedures, goal setting, and improving student attendance can increase teacher and student efficacy and provide a setting for all stakeholders to feel successful (Copland, 2003; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019).

The final step in the turnaround theory of action is the ability for campus administration and staff to sustain the turnaround efforts. This area is the least studied piece of the theory of action, with gaping holes in the literature. Nevertheless, few turnaround efforts are sustainable and often fail beyond the first three years (Pham et al., 2020). One of the contributing factors is the organizational instability that comes with low student attendance rates and high levels of teacher turnover. Hiring and retention practices are vital to the organizational health of a turnaround campus. Efforts and systems tend to fall apart after the principal leaves the campus, which serves as another contributing factor. On the other hand, strong hiring and retention practices can sustain turnaround efforts after a principal leaves the campus if the teacher leaders on the campus are involved in the hiring process of both the new principal and new staff members (Copland, 2003).

### Turnaround Principals

The leader of a school matters. A principal's leadership practice and style can positively or negatively impact students' and teachers' success opportunities (Hitt & Player, 2019). In an urban school setting, the principal plays an even more critical role in the success of the students on the campus. Freeman and Fields (2020) observed that principals working in urban schools only stayed for an average of 3.2 years. The shortness of a principal's tenure at a particular campus can severely impede the development of collegial relationships and the collective work

of reaching a shared mission or vision. A short tenure can also alter hiring practices and teacher retention. Notably, schools labeled as ineffective and are not meeting local, state, or federal expectations are often in urban areas serving students from minoritized or low-income backgrounds. These schools require a different type of principal to ensure change and provide opportunities for success (Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt et al., 2019). Thus, turnaround principals are an essential component for improving educational opportunities for students at consistently ineffective schools. They are leaders who “generate rapid and dramatic change in schools to reverse the continuation of adverse effects on students” (Hitt et al., 2019, p. 191). Turnaround principals display personal and professional traits that lend themselves to the success of a struggling campus.

Principals’ personal and professional characteristics allow for the ability to change a campus from ineffective to effective. Hitt et al. (2018; 2019) identified seven competencies exhibited by successful turnaround principals. These included the ability to (a) initiate change and persist through diversity, (b) inspire and motivate staff, (c) affect staff response, (d) build and develop capacity, (e) inspire students’ commitment, (f) observe significant problems and develop solutions, and (h) solve problems in unique ways.

Principals who initiate change and persist through adversity have a sense of academic press and focus their energy on solving challenges that arise. These leaders employ various strategies to accomplish difficult tasks and encounter problems with innovative and unique ideas. They engage in continuous inquiry focused on learning, curriculum, standards, and best practices and fiercely protect the campus vision. Additionally, school leaders who exemplify this competency take responsibility for decisions made, even if those decisions are unpopular amongst the staff or district administration. This competency appears to have the most significant

single impact on student achievement and often employed by turnaround principals working to uphold and sustain change (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt et al., 2019).

Principals who initiate change and persist have high levels of resilience and perseverance, as setbacks and failure to meet goals can threaten the school's success (Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt et al., 2019). Other often observed traits in highly effective principals are their ability to commit to working with students, with a developed sense of efficacy. Hitt and Player (2019) noted that these traits influence a principal's effectiveness and are less likely to change than are general practices learned in a principal preparation program.

The second trait a turnaround principal employs is inspiring and motivating the staff to reach school and student goals. School leaders do this by encouraging staff members to communicate concerns or questions and sharing beneficial information that could impact the staff member, a student, or the school. School leaders who exemplify this competency see the value in intentional and collegial relationships and establish clear expectations for collaboration, including implementing professional learning communities and shared planning periods, intending to facilitate sharing information and building relationships among teammates and staff members. Collaborative structures allow staff members to develop their capacity and knowledge of pedagogy, share information regarding students, and deepen their understanding of the content and skills. Studies show that schools that are deemed ineffective are also learning impoverished for both teachers and students in the school, while more effective schools tend to be learning enriched; thus, collaborative structures help students and staff members develop as learners and create an environment that is learning enriched (Charner-Laird, 2017; Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2018).

Successful school leaders also have a strong ability to affect staff member's perceptions

and elicit desired responses. They consider staff responses to information and adapt the approach to obtain the desired response. Successful turnaround principals identify influential staff members and use them as change agents to encourage others to see the value in decisions or contribute ideas to improve future decisions (Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt et al., 2019). Additionally, principals identify ineffective staff members and find ways to move them to a more successful position or remove them from the campus entirely. While teacher turnover can have detrimental effects on a staff (Redding & Henry, 2019), a negative staff member can have deleterious effects on the campus and student achievement.

The fourth turnaround principal competency identified by Hitt et al. (2018) is building and developing capacity for school staff. This competency requires keeping the school's vision at the forefront of all decisions, holding teachers and staff accountable for student achievement and for reaching school goals, and supporting teachers and students through modeling, advice, and resources to meet instructional needs. Additionally, principals exemplifying this competency confront staff members who are not meeting expectations, require compliance with campus expectations, and create a plan for those who do not improve. The principal also suggests ways to modify the curriculum and instructional approaches to ensure students at all levels are receiving opportunities for growth. These principals expect high achievement for all students (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2018).

Another competency employed by successful turnaround principals is their commitment to students and student achievement. These school leaders relentlessly advocate for their students and believe that they can succeed. They take ownership and responsibility for student learning and view themselves as the instructional leader of the campus. Turnaround principals exhibit a strong sense of self-efficacy, as they face seemingly insurmountable challenges when advocating

for students, inspiring teachers to do the same, and making instructional or personnel changes when necessary. Finally, principals employing this competency believe that all students can be successful at their school regardless of their race, ethnicity, or background (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2018).

Turnaround principals have a unique ability to identify problems and create solutions. They observe trends in data, personnel, and practices and develop new or modify existing solutions for solving problems. Further, turnaround principals have an innate ability to find significant concerns and establish a vision and focus for mitigating issues. Additionally, they have a knack for identifying influential staff members who will collectively work toward goals that have been established (Hitt et al., 2018).

The final competency identified by Hitt et al. (2018) is a turnaround principal's ability to solve problems in unique and unconventional ways. Principals meeting this competency can look at a complex problem and create a logical, step-by-step solution for solving the issue. They also can identify barriers and find solutions for facing them. Finally, those who uphold this competency communicate concerns and solutions with teachers and staff members and motivate them to support the vision (Copland, 2003; Hitt et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2020).

Most turnaround principals cannot employ all seven competencies, however Hitt et al. (2019) observed that principals who inspired and motivated staff members, built and developed capacity amongst teachers, and elicited desired responses had significant and direct effects on turnaround efforts, exceeding the effects of a single competency. Therefore, district leaders must be able to identify turnaround principal candidates who can motivate staff members to change, develop capacity among teachers and teams, and stimulate responses to improve student achievement at turnaround campuses (Hitt et al., 2018; Hitt et al., 2019).

Researchers who studied turnaround principals examined principals' practices and personal characteristics within the first three years of turning around a campus. However, some researchers observed prolonged and sustained effects of turnaround campuses and their impact on student achievement, teacher turnover, and efficacy. Pham et al. (2020) observed that student attendance increased while student mobility decreased in schools with sustained turnaround practices. Also, teacher efficacy, experience, and effectiveness increased, while the turnover rate decreased. Turnaround principals who intentionally implement the seven competencies on a campus have the potential to increase the achievement opportunities and teacher experience rates at the school. Additional focus on developing the campus culture, hiring and retention practices, and collegial relationships promotes student achievement and turnaround efforts at an ineffective school (Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019).

### Turnaround Schools

The education system of the United States forces the need for turnaround schools. Through legislative policies guaranteeing a quality education for all students and assessment systems that ensure success for a limited few while rating schools based on student success on the assessment (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019), turnaround schools and turnaround theory have been attempted for decades with limited and short-lived success. Federal policies force state and local education agencies to attempt drastic change to improve opportunities for students. In theory, this makes sense; nearly everyone wants the education system to instruct the populace to ensure generations of workers and a fruitful economy (Fullan, 2006). However, scant resources and limited direction require schools and local educational agencies to make do with what minute resources they have for improving the educational opportunities of their students.

When No Child Left Behind (2002) passed, federal policymakers believed that state and



local education agencies could support schools in need of turnaround; however, it was quickly evident that neither entity had the resources or personnel to provide the necessary assistance. Further, the same policymakers assumed that “all public schools, regardless of context, could make 100% of their student proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014” (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019, p. 424). To provide fiscal support to those who were working toward reading and mathematics proficiency, schools were provided School Improvement Grants (SIG), which became an important source of additional funding for schools in need of improvement. The SIG program was eliminated in 2015 with the passage of ESSA, but Title I funds were increased, and state and local education agencies were given more flexibility in how they could spend that money, regardless of their ability to support low-performing schools (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019).

Through the SIG program, schools had four options for improving low-performing schools: restart, transformation, turnaround, and closure. The restart option required schools to close and re-open as a public charter school. Transformation schools allowed schools to maintain their staffs but required new teacher evaluations for all teachers. Turnaround efforts required leaders to re-evaluate their staffs and re-hire no more than 50% of current teachers. Finally, the closure model required the school to be closed and students to be assigned to other campuses. Local education agencies could receive SIG funds if they opted for the transformation or turnaround options (United States Department of Education, 2018).

Turnaround efforts have been tried in many states with varying levels of success. School turnaround efforts in Los Angeles, CA were monitored and reported to have “significant and substantial impacts on student outcomes” (Strunk et al., 2015, p. 33) and led to positive impacts in reading scores for initial cohorts of students; however, significant negative impacts were

reported in both reading and math scores for later cohorts. Strunk et al. reported that dramatic reform and confusing reform changes could have interfered with the later cohorts, but found that substantial and research-based supports, such as professional development, shared planning time, and effective hiring practices are a necessary component to turnaround efforts and whole-school reforms.

Schools employing turnaround efforts in Ohio had similar results. Carlson and Lavertu (2018) studied the effects of the SIG program in Ohio public schools, finding that positive achievement coincided with a significant increase in funding per student, finding that SIG funds allowed an increase from \$1,500 per pupil to \$3,000 per pupil annually. Unfortunately, success was short-lived, as their study found that school and student success diminished or disappeared once the SIG funding ended. Interestingly, the researchers found that funding had little to no effect on administrator and teacher turnover, and some schools closed even after receiving SIG funds. Thus, increasing or changing one piece of the education system will not improve student achievement opportunities. Instead, the system must be analyzed and changed as a whole if we are to see long-term success (Fullan, 2006).

Some states, like Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, publicize school and district success or failure by issuing letter grades based on standardized test scores. The purpose of the A-F system is to “condense a variety of educational indicators into a single grade that can quickly and easily signal educational quality” (Tanner, 2016, p. 7). Florida instituted this practice in 1999, providing schools with high letter grades with rewards and providing assistance and sanctions to those with lower grades. Longitudinal research provided generally positive effects of this practice, with schools facing accountability pressures changing instructional practices to improve student achievement opportunities (Rouse et al., 2013). This coincides with evidence of success

in Kentucky, where positive results were discovered (Dee & Dizon-Ross, 2019). Louisiana followed Florida's lead in 2012, placing the additional label of "Priority School" on any school that received an F or had graduation rates below 60%. Contrary to Florida's success, Dee and Dizon-Ross (2019) conclude that "Louisiana's accountability system has not been effective in catalyzing reforms in its most challenged schools" (p. 336). These findings are similar to those found in Michigan and Rhode Island, who also showed ineffective practices in creating reform for low-performing schools.

Texas introduced the A-F accountability system in 2015 and implemented it through HB22 (2017). Since then, letter grades have been issued to schools and local education agencies every year except for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Texas Education Agency, 2020c). Standardized test scores taken from STAAR hold the most weight in a school and district's grade, while attendance and graduation rates have lower impacts on the score. An interesting point to note is that schools serving large populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to receive lower grades, while those serving students from predominantly middle and upper-class students receive higher grades, skewing the data and ignoring significant disproportionalities and challenges many schools face (Tanner, 2016). State and federal accountability requirements promote inequalities in educational opportunities and challenge educators and researchers alike to strive for rapid turnaround at struggling schools. Unfortunately, the problems facing schools deemed ineffective by low letter grades are beyond the school's control (Fullan, 2006) and the scope of this study.

Dramatic school improvement has been sought for years and the formula for rapid improvement eludes educators and researchers to this day. Many schools in need of improvement have various problems that must be addressed to make change, yet they do not have the

resources, personnel, or support to make the changes necessary to improve educational opportunities. Many successful turnaround schools report financial support, as well as constant support from consultants and instructional leaders who provided direct and immediate support. Unfortunately, many schools attempting dramatic improvements are not willing or do not have the resources to provide the financial or instructional support needed for success. Turnaround schools also require cultural and instructional shifts to have comprehensive school reform. The administrative team at a school must be willing to change the culture of the school, hire highly effective educators and retain them, and improve the instructional opportunities provided at the school (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

### Summary

To comply with federal, state, and local demands, school districts seek to continuously improve student achievement opportunities. Unfortunately, not all schools guarantee achievement for all students and are deemed ineffective. Further, ineffective schools often serve large populations of students from low-income and minoritized backgrounds. To help mitigate some of the issues ineffective schools face, school districts may utilize turnaround principals. Turnaround principals employ various leadership styles, seek to develop the school's culture, and require a high sense of self-efficacy to promote effective practices and improve students' learning opportunities. Therefore, district and campus leaders leading ineffective schools must utilize practices that benefit all students, regardless of the students' background.

Research in the areas of leadership style, school culture, efficacy, and turnaround principals has been thoroughly explored; however, there is minimal research focused on the use of turnaround principals under the A-F accountability system utilized by TEA. Therefore, my goal in conducting this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that turnaround

principals use and how the practices impact student, teacher, principal, and school achievement, as well as whether those practices provide an opportunity for sustainability. Chapter 3 provides information regarding the methodology for this qualitative study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The Texas Legislature passed HB22 in 2017 to comply with ESSA (2015), requiring that every school receive a letter grade based on state assessment data. While HB22 sought to identify and support ineffective schools and school districts to create equitable opportunities for all students, the unfortunate consequence of the bill's passage is that it drove a wedge between schools with high letter grades and those with failing letter grades. Struggling schools experience a variety of difficulties, including the ability to maintain experienced and successful teachers, leading to a decrease in staff trust, teacher collective and self-efficacy, and student performance.

However, some principals establish and maintain a shared mission, provide opportunities for collegial relationships to develop, and retain effective teachers at their ineffective campuses, and can turn around the school. The purpose of this study was to explore turnaround leadership behaviors are in use at failing or struggling campuses and which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable long-term educational opportunities for all students.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are principals' perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?
2. To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?
3. What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?

This chapter includes an explanation of the methodology of this study. In this chapter, I explicate the research design and provide a detailed description of the research sites, population, and sample. Additionally, this chapter outlines the data collection tools and procedures utilized

throughout this study, as well as how the data were analyzed. Finally, the limitations of this study and their impact on the generalizability of the results are identified.

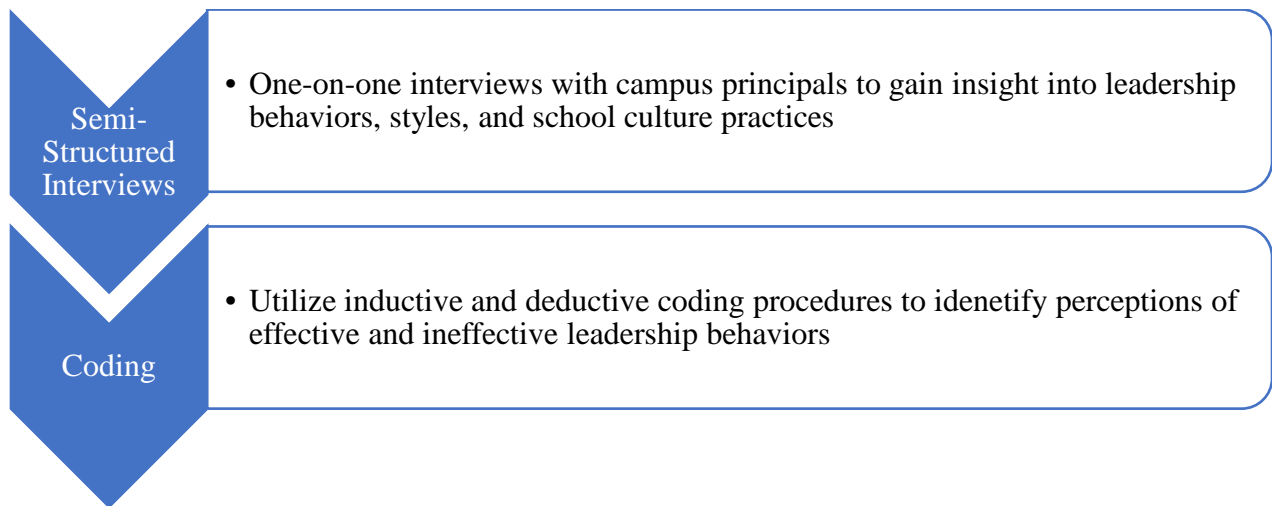
### Research Design

The increased accountability measures placed on schools and districts have influenced the behaviors of campus principals and district leaders to improve accountability ratings and prevent the stringent measures promised by state and federal education agencies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to determine which leadership behaviors were exhibited at the studied failing schools or schools identified for targeted support and which of these behaviors have the potential provided long-term equitable opportunities for all students. The collection of interview data provides insight into the problem at hand; thus, a phenomenological qualitative method was used. This design allows for in-depth analysis and explanation of behaviors and practices used by principals. Deductive and inductive coding allowed for deeper connections to be made throughout data collection. Further, the use of multiple participants with a variety of experiences appealed to a broader audience while providing triangulation and complementarity of the data collected, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Hesse-Biber (2017).

The exploratory phenomenological design used semi-structured interviews to gather information about leadership practices at schools identified as in need of targeted support by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Principal perceptions and practices were analyzed and compared to research-based practices and other participants' practices. This methodology was chosen because of an interest in determining which leadership behaviors are perceived to be in use by principals working to improve struggling campuses. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of how this design was used.

Figure 2

*Phenomenological Qualitative Design*



Ethical Assurances

In any research study, it is important to identify the ethical issues that are related to how the study is designed and implemented and how the resulting data are analyzed.

Ethical Standards

Throughout this study, I carefully followed all ethical guidelines put in place by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Texas. The school district, individual campuses, and participants involved in this study were assured that their privacy protected, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Each of these entities and all participants received a pseudonym to protect their identity. All data were secured on a password-protected computer that was stored in a locked room for the duration of the study. After the required three years of retaining study data, all data will be destroyed. My dissertation chair and I were the only individuals who had access to the interview responses. Additionally, I completed the human subjects online training course through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative in July 2019. Finally, this study was reviewed by an institutional review board to ensure ethical



guidelines were present and followed for the safety and wellbeing of all participants.

All participants were asked to sign a consent form and were assured they could decline participation at any time without concern for retaliation. Additionally, I ensured that all data points were triangulated to establish validity and trustworthiness. Participants were asked to participate in member-checking, and adjustments to the data were made per the participants' request, if necessary. Bryman (2016) discussed the need for validity in a study. Validity was upheld by converging interview data from all participants to observe their perceptions of turnaround leadership behaviors at their campuses.

### Researcher Positionality

Throughout this study, I considered researcher positionality in all stages of data collection and analysis. As a school leader in the district where the study took place, it was imperative that I created an environment that makes my participants feel safe to share their thoughts and ideas about their perceptions of leadership behaviors. Additionally, I am part of a leadership team that is attempting to turn around a failing campus. Through this experience and in my research for this study, I developed perceptions and opinions about turnaround leadership and the practices that turnaround leaders must employ. As a result, throughout this study, I regularly and critically examined my beliefs and perceptions when collecting and analyzing data to ensure my biases did not interfere with my analysis of the findings. Continuous and purposeful bracketing of my thoughts helped assure that any potential biases were recognized and avoided.

### Population and Sample

When selecting a sample for a research study, it first is important to identify and recognize the greater population to which the sample may infer. Another important factor to consider is the context of the studied site.

## Context of the Sites

The sites chosen for this study are located within Blue Ridge Independent School District (BRISD) (pseudonym). BRISD is located in north Texas, serving approximately 26,000 students, prekindergarten through twelfth grade. Over 16,000 students in BRISD are considered economically disadvantaged and approximately 13,000 students are classified at-risk. BRISD employs over 1,650 teachers and nearly 100 campus administrators.

Six elementary schools in BRISD were selected for this study based on their school accountability rating or need for targeted support, as indicated by TEA and on turnaround efforts that had been or were being implemented at each campus. Eureka Elementary School (pseudonym) is an urban elementary school in north Texas. This Title I school serves students from grades 1-5, enrolling just over 500 students. The ethnic distribution on this campus is comprised of close to 50% African American, just over 40% Hispanic, and less than 5% for White, Asian, and Two or More Races. Of the students attending this campus, almost 90% of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged. Additionally, just over 30% of the student population is classified as emergent bilinguals (EB), previously referenced as English learners and nearly 65% of the students are considered at-risk. In 2020, Eureka Elementary had a mobility rate of over 20% (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, this school received an accountability rating of F and was identified as a campus in need of targeted support (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Eureka Elementary has nearly 50 staff members. Teachers are approximately 75% of the staff population, while professional support, administration, and educational aides make up the other 25%. Nearly 40% of the staff were new teachers; approximately 30% of staff members had between one and ten years of experience, and less than 30% of staff members had more than 11

years of teaching experience. At the time, the principal had over 10 years of administrative experience; two of those years at Eureka Elementary (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

Gates Elementary (pseudonym) also is an urban elementary school in north Texas. This PK-5 school serves just over 600 students with over 50% African American, close to 40% Hispanic, and 5% or fewer White, Asian, and Two or More Races. Additionally, nearly 90% of the students attending this Title I campus were economically disadvantaged, thus entitling this school to Title I funding. Close to 30% of students were classified as EBs and over 40% were considered at-risk. Gates Elementary had a mobility rate of over 30% in 2020 (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, this school received an accountability rating of a B; however, in 2017, the school had an accountability rating of improvement required. At the time of this study, this school was identified as a campus in need of targeted support (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Gates Elementary has approximately 60 staff members with nearly 75% of staff members are teachers and professional support, campus administration, and campus aides comprise the remaining 25%. Less than 10% of the teachers at Gates Elementary were beginning teachers at the time of this study. Approximately 25% had 1-5 years of experience, more than 30% had 6-10 years of experience, and more than 30% had 11-30 years of experience. At the time, the principal has nearly five years of experience with three of those years are at Gates Elementary (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

The third research site was King Elementary (pseudonym). This suburban elementary school serves over 600 students grades PK-5. The ethnic makeup of this Title I campus includes just over 5% African American, nearly 90% Hispanic, and less than 5% White, Asian, and Two or More Races. Just over 80% of the students in attendance were classified as economically disadvantaged, over 50% were EBs, and nearly 60% of were at-risk. King Elementary had a

mobility rate of just over 10% in 2020 (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, this elementary school received an accountability rating of a C, while in previous years, this school had met standard. This school was also identified by TEA as a school in need of targeted support (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

King Elementary employs nearly 60 staff members with 70% of the staff is comprised of teachers, while the remaining 30% was professional support, campus administration, and educational aides. Most of the teachers at King Elementary had between 1-5 years of teaching experience (over 30%) at the time of this study. Less than 25% were beginning-level teachers; nearly 15% had 6-10 years of experience; and nearly 30% had 11 or more years of teaching experience. The principal was in their first year as a campus principal at the time (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

The fourth research site was Everest Elementary (pseudonym). Everest Elementary is a Title I suburban elementary school serving over 400 students pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. At the time of the study, approximately 40% of the students were African American, 40% were Hispanic, and less than 10% were White, American Indian, Asian, and Two or More Races. Over 80% of students at Everest Elementary were classified as economically disadvantaged, over 20% of students were EBs, and nearly 50% were at-risk. Everest Elementary had a mobility rate of nearly 20% in 2020 (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, Everest Elementary received an accountability rating of a C; in previous years, this school met standard according to TEA's Performance Index. Everest Elementary was identified by TEA as a school in need of targeted support (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

At the time, there were over 40 staff members at Everest Elementary, with over 70% teachers, with the remaining 30% is comprised of professional support, campus administration,

and educational aides. Less than 10% of the teachers were in their first year of teaching at the time of this study. Over 30% of teachers had 1-5 years of experience, nearly 20% had 6-10 years of experience, and over 40% had over 11 years of teaching experience. The principal at Everest Elementary has approximately five years of experience as a campus principal with four of those years have been at Everest Elementary (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

Chandler Elementary is a suburban elementary school in Texas that serves over 400 students pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Nearly 30% of its students were African American, with approximately 20% are Hispanic, over 30% are Asian, and nearly 10% of its population is White. Less than 5% of students attending Chandler Elementary are Two or More Races or American Indian. Approximately 50% of the students attending this Title I school were classified as economically disadvantaged, over 40% of students were EB, and over 60% of the students were at-risk. Chandler Elementary had a mobility rate of over 20% in 2020 (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, Chandler Elementary posted an accountability rating of a C. Further, this school was identified as a school in need of targeted support that year, according to TEA (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

There were over 40 staff members at Chandler Elementary, with nearly 70% of staff members being teachers. Most of the teachers working at this campus had between one and five years of teaching experience (approximately 40%). Nearly 30% of teachers had 6-10 years of experience, over 20% of teachers had 11-20 years of experience, and less than 10% of the teaching staff was new to the profession. The principal serving Chandler Elementary has approximately five years of experience at the time, all at Chandler Elementary (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

Garden Ridge Elementary (pseudonym) is a suburban elementary school in Texas. This

Title I school served over 500 students from grades pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The ethnic distribution on this campus was comprised of over 90% Hispanic students, and less than 5% of African American, White, and Asian students. Of the students attending this campus, over 90% of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. Additionally, nearly 80% of the student population was classified as EBs and nearly 80% of the students were considered at-risk. In 2020, Garden Ridge Elementary had a mobility rate of over 11% (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In 2019, this school received an accountability rating of C and was identified as a campus that is in need of targeted support (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

There were nearly 60 staff members employed at Garden Ridge Elementary with nearly 70% of staff members are teachers with the remaining 30% comprised of professional, campus administration, and educational aides. Nearly 30% of teachers at Garden Ridge Elementary had 1-5 years of teaching experience at the time of the study, and over 20% of teachers had 6-10 years and 11-20 years of experience. Over 10% of the teachers had more than 21 years of teaching experience and approximately 10% of teachers were new to the educational profession. The principal had approximately 5 years of campus leadership experience, with all at Garden Ridge Elementary (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

## Population

The population for a study is the group from which the sample is selected (Bryman, 2016). Thus, the population represented in the current study included north Texas schools in need of targeted support. More specifically, I studied turnaround leadership in an accountability system that provides a letter grade based on standardized assessment data.

## Sample

A convenient and purposive sample was chosen from the population based on proximity

to my location that the fact that each site was at some point in need of state support. Though TEA declared that school ratings were on hold for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years because of COVID-19 (Texas Education Agency, 2020c), the seven campuses chosen for this study had various accountability ratings, but all had been classified as in need of targeted support by TEA (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). For purposive sampling, six campus principals leading campuses that needed targeted support were recruited for a semi-structured interview to examine their perspectives of their practices and behaviors, as well as to determine how they saw themselves as turnaround leaders.

#### Data Collection Tools

To determine which leadership behaviors and perceptions were in use at the selected campuses, the six semi-structured principal interviews followed the same interview protocol (Appendix B). Hesse-Biber (2017) noted that interviews allow the researcher to gain deeper insight. For this study, individual interviews served to gain insight into the turnaround process and provided campus and district leader perspectives.

#### Data Collection Procedures

This qualitative study was conducted in spring 2022. Through a personal email, I solicited interest from the six principals assigned to the selected research sites that were classified as in need of targeted support, to gain insight into perceived leadership behaviors that contribute to turnaround efforts.

Interview participants were selected purposively, based on their assigned position as a principal, as well as their willingness to participate. A recruitment email was sent to solicit interest and participation in the study and informed consent was obtained (Appendix A). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes in length and followed the semi-structured one-on-

one interview protocol found in Appendix B. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. I utilized the semi-structured interview structure to guide the conversation to determine principal behaviors and their perceptions of the success of those behaviors and to allow the participants to share information they feel might be relevant to the study.

With participant permission, each interview was audio-recorded. In addition, I took notes during each interview to document body language and behaviors of the participants. Upon completion of the data collection, recordings were uploaded to Rev.com©. Then I compared the transcription with the audio recording to ensure accuracy. Once the transcription was complete and accurate, I emailed the transcript to the participants to review and make adjustments they felt were needed. The interview protocol utilized in this study was field tested to ensure credibility and increase validity, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

### Data Analysis Strategies

Initially, inductive coding strategies were used to analyze the interview data collected. The inductive process allowed me to work “back and forth between the themes and the database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181). Therefore, interview data were examined to form categories and themes from participants’ perspectives. Additionally, deductive coding was used to compare participants’ perspectives about their leadership behavior to current research, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018).

Upon the completion of each interview, I uploaded the audio files into Rev.com© for transcription. Once transcriptions were received, participants were asked to engage in member checking to ensure that the transcriptions communicated what the participant said in the interview. Each participant was encouraged to clarify or amend any information. After all



participants have engaged in the member checking, I coded the transcripts to identify themes. Initially, I identified several a priori codes: shared mission and vision, hiring practices, collegial relationships, principal self-efficacy, practices, teacher capacity, parents and community, and support. After reviewing the data and identifying deductive themes that emerged, I reevaluated my initial codes and made adjustments, including combining some themes, such as leadership practices and behaviors and, and expanding others, such as support. Over 13 themes emerged from the data once I had completed several rounds of coding. Then, themes were organized by research question to identify practices and behaviors in use at turnaround schools and to identify gaps in the data.

### Limitations

Limitations are areas that the researcher has little to no control over and are present in every study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The first limitation was the generalizability of the results. Because each of the research sites was located within one school district in north Texas, the results may not be easily generalized to other schools or districts; nevertheless, the information gleaned from this study can provide insight and understanding into leadership behaviors in schools in similar situations.

Another limitation was that the interviewed principals may have differing perspectives based on experience, age, and student population of their campus. To counter that possible limitation, multiple principals were chosen to gain the perspectives of a variety of leaders to help make the results more generalizable to other campuses and districts.

Finally, this study may have inherent limitations due to researcher bias. It was important that I recognized any bias toward participants, powers, and participant responses to ensure valid

and reliable data, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Limitations were mitigated through triangulation of findings and disclosure of positionality.

### Summary

This qualitative study was designed to determine which leadership behaviors are exhibited at schools identified as in need of targeted support and which of those behaviors have the potential to provide long-term educational opportunities for all students. Chapter 3 outlined the research design and methodology, ethical considerations, sampling procedures, data collection tools, data collection procedures, data analysis strategies, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth description and analysis of the interview findings. These data were used to answer the research questions posed for this study and add to the current literature regarding turnaround leadership behaviors.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was designed to identify and understand turnaround leadership behaviors that are exhibited at struggling campuses as identified by Texas Education Agency's (TEA) A-F accountability system. Further, I sought to explore whether the behaviors have the potential to provide equitable, long-term educational opportunities for all students. Finally, this phenomenological study included the lived experiences of turnaround principals to provide information about behaviors and practices to guide future turnaround leaders. I collected and analyzed data from semi-structured interviews with six turnaround leaders to answer the following research questions:

1. What are principals' perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?
2. To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?
3. What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?

In this qualitative study, I collected data through semi-structured interviews with principals at schools deemed in need of targeted support, based on TEA's designations. The interviews were designed to gather information about the participant's perceptions of their own behaviors and practices, as well as to observe trends used by leaders in the same district. Further, the questions asked in the interviews were used to answer the three research questions posed.

In this chapter, I provide an explanation of the findings based on my data analysis. The findings are organized by the research questions posed for this study and by the themes that were identified through deductive coding. Further, as I analyzed the data, new and unexpected themes emerged from the data. These themes are presented as well.

The participants in this study had varying levels of leadership experience, including principal experience. A few principals had been at their campuses for three or more years, while others had spent less than two years leading their campuses. Further, three of the participants had instructional leadership experience, either as an instructional coach or an instructional facilitator. Their leadership and instructional experiences were a factor in their responses to the questions posed, as well as their perception of themselves as turnaround leaders and the support they believe is needed to support turnaround schools. Table 1 provides a concise description of each participant.

Table 1

*Description of Participants (Texas Education Agency, 2022)*

Pseudonym	Years as a Principal	Category of Other Leadership Position Held	Grade when Principal was Assigned	Current Grade
Morgan Williams	10	Assistant Principal	F (held since 2019)	C
Taylor Johnson	4	Instructional Facilitator Assistant Principal	F	D
Alex Brown	1	Assistant Principal	C (held since 2019)	B
Drew Garcia	5	Assistant Principal	Met Standard with 1/7 Distinctions	B
Jordan Wilson	6	Instructional Coach Assistant Principal	Met Standard with 1/7 Distinctions	A
Kyle Miller	5	Instructional Coach Assistant Principal	Met Standard with 4/7 Distinctions	B

The themes presented emerged from the discussion that took place during their semi-structured interviews and from anecdotal notes I took during the interviews. Table 2 shows the themes and their relation to the research questions.

Table 2

*Deductive and Inductive Findings and Related Research Questions*

Research Questions	Deductive Themes	Inductive Themes
What are principals’ perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal Self-Efficacy</li> <li>• Shared Mission and Vision</li> </ul>	
To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring Practices</li> <li>• Collegial Relationships</li> <li>• Parents and Community Support</li> <li>• Teacher Capacity and Efficacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)</li> <li>• Expectations of Teachers</li> <li>• Mentoring and Onboarding</li> </ul>
What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?	Campus-Level Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent Support</li> <li>• Student Behavior</li> <li>• Teacher Motivation and Support</li> </ul>

Research Question 1

*What are principals’ perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?*

Principals’ perceptions of their ability to lead as a turnaround principal can affect the practices and behaviors they employ as campus leaders. This section explores the participants’ beliefs about their abilities to lead at turnaround campuses, as well as how their work aligns with the district and campus mission and vision. Findings are reported according to the emerged themes, both inductive and deductive themes.

Principal Self-Efficacy

The participants had mixed opinions about their belief in their own ability to lead as a turnaround campus. Only three of the six participants believed in their ability to lead as a

turnaround principal. Drew Garcia (pseudonym), principal of Everest Elementary (pseudonym), stated:

I do believe in my ability to lead this campus, because if I didn't believe in my own ability... I wouldn't be here, or I shouldn't be here. Or if I felt that I didn't have what it takes to help our school, help our kids, help our staff improve, then I wouldn't be here.

Another principal echoed this sentiment, noting that being in the fifth year of leading their campus, they also saw the changes they wanted to make and the fruits of their labor. A third participant noted that they believe in their ability to lead, but also made it clear that they do not have all the answers.

Interestingly, the three other participants noted that they struggle with their belief in their ability to lead their school. These three principals had several years of experience as a leader and held various leadership positions prior to their current position. Yet, they believe they are still working on their belief in themselves for leading their campuses, feeling that they had room to grow or they were a work in progress. Taylor Johnson of Gates Elementary commented:

I don't think at a school like mine, you're ever done, because it's always ever-changing. And so, when you talk about how confident I am, I'm never confident...I'm just not.

Another principal echoed that sentiment, saying that leading a turnaround school is a difficult task and that they feel like they have failed at turnaround efforts since they arrived at the campus. Yet another principal paused for an extended time when the question was posed and then quietly asked to skip the question before stepping out to gather themselves.

When examining the data holistically, each of the principals reported practices and behaviors that support how they are making a difference in their school and are leading campus and district initiatives. Further, current results from TEA show that all of the principals interviewed led their school to an improved letter grade. This is discussed in greater detail in

Chapter 5. Nevertheless, the interview data reported above reflected principals' personal beliefs in their ability to lead.

### Shared Mission and Vision

Each of the participants' leadership qualities came through in their one-on-one interview. Many of the leaders in BRISD displayed various characteristics of leadership qualities, but all the principals interviewed discussed a shared mission and vision. In addition, several principals stated or implied that their campus mission and vision aligned with the district mission and vision, including how they interacted with the parents as well as with the students. Jordan

Wilson, principal of Chandler Elementary, explained:

So, of course our vision is aligned to our district's vision, but here at this school, looking at our students, what's our vision for our students? Because that impacts how we teach them. It impacts how we approach parents. It impacts everything we do with the students. So, our vision is aligned, but just making sure that we see our students and our vision so that we know how to approach them and not approach them with limited attitudes ... or limited beliefs.

Four of the principals interviewed shared similar views about their mission and vision; finding that relationships with students, staff, and other stakeholders; and sharing the vision was a central component to the daily work of the staff and students at their schools. Chandler

Elementary's principal further explained:

Without those relationships, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to move the work forward. So I would say a lot of time needed to be spent building relationships and then just having a clear vision of where we wanted students to go. And then sharing that vision so that others would believe the vision and ... creating an environment where we're all responsible and capable.

Eureka's principal, Morgan Williams, echoed the idea of providing support and communicating a belief in the students' ability, explaining:

We have the belief in what we do and the belief in the students we serve. Now we need the support to serve them properly. We have the desire. We love our kids. We know they can do it.

All the principals interviewed implied the importance of teacher and staff collective efficacy, though very few of them utilized the terminology. Nevertheless, the turnaround leaders in BRISD appeared to understand the necessity of efficacy in serving students, especially those students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. This view is discussed in greater detail later in the next section.

Two of the principals interviewed focused more on data and evidence when talking about their shared mission and vision. These principals touched on the importance of relationships, but their evidence of student success relied more heavily on data points and tracking student progress. The importance of planning and preparing for students to take ownership of their learning was especially evident for Alex Brown, principal of King Elementary, explained:

We focus in on demonstrations of learning and, and within that demonstration of learning, what is the focus, the learning objective. From the learning objective to the gradual release model and then down to a student ownership portion to make sure that the learning target matched the activity.

At King Elementary, their shared mission and vision focused on student progress and evidence to support the demonstration of learning. Throughout our interview, Garden Ridge Elementary's principal also focused highly on data and evidence as a focal point of their shared mission and vision.

Although the principals interviewed appeared to have various ways of achieving their mission, they all had a similar vision: to provide students with opportunities to achieve at high levels. Further, they wanted to ensure every student had the best teacher possible to instruct and educate the students in their school. The expectation that every individual and group embrace high expectations permeated the conversations I had with the principals of BRISD, and though it was not explicitly stated, the principals communicated such expectations with everyone that had a connection to the building, from district personnel to teachers, students, and families. This is



explored in the next section. There was also a sense that the teachers had high expectations for themselves, as well. One principal explained it succinctly, saying the teachers don't "like to disappoint themselves, and then disappoint the kids or disappoint me." This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews with the principals in BRISD and supported the theme of the shared mission and vision.

Although the principals that participated in this study had various feelings about their ability to lead as turnaround principals, each leader expressed the importance of a shared mission and vision. Further, the mission and vision aligned closely with the district's mission for students. The principals' perceptions of their leadership ability, as well as their shared mission and vision determine the practices and behaviors that are put in place on their campuses. This is explored further in the next section.

## Research Question 2

*To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?*

A principal's behaviors and practices in leading a school are determined by his or her belief in their ability to lead and the mission and vision of the campus and district. Each of the participants in this study struggled to explain specific practices they employ when leading their campus, but discussion throughout the interview process uncovered many of the behaviors and practices employed at their campuses. This section explores teacher capacity and efficacy, collegial relationships, professional learning communities (PLCs), expectations of teachers, hiring practices, onboarding and mentoring, and parent and community support.

### Teacher Capacity and Efficacy

Each of the principals interviewed noted the importance of teacher development, building

teacher capacity, and helping teachers see and feel that they can make a difference. Part of teacher development is providing teachers with the time and space to develop their understanding of the curriculum, build their capacity for best practices, celebrate their successes and identify areas of growth. Everest Elementary's principal, Drew Garcia, explained that they try to make sure that they "support the teachers ... and provide the time," explaining that it is "something that's important." Alex Brown, King Elementary's principal, stated that they make it a point to build teachers up every single day to help them understand "that they're making a difference."

When I pressed the principals to explain how they build their teachers' instructional capacity and teach best practices, each leader had a way of ensuring their teachers had the ability and confidence to deviate from the district-assigned curriculum to ensure students were succeeding. Most of the campus leaders shared the same sentiment as Drew Garcia, principal of Everest Elementary, who explained:

They are the leaders of their class. Like, they are THE leaders. And I tell them, this is your class. You are the leader of your class. They know we are here for kids. They are number one. And they will do whatever it takes for a kid to be successful.

While the leaders may tell this to teachers, it is the actions of the principal that show them what they can or cannot do. Taylor Johnson, principal of Gates Elementary explained that they knew the teachers had developed capacity when they started leading their collaborative team meetings: that they were "part of the group now, not the ones leading it." They explicitly stated, "I think that to me was a big one as far as building instructional capacity." Kyle Miller of Garden Ridge Elementary explained that there is bounded autonomy:

My new teachers follow the curriculum, but my veteran teachers, the ones who have been teaching a while in the same grade level, I give them freedom. You know, they know what kids need. I'm not going to go in and say this isn't [the reading curriculum], this

isn't [the math curriculum]. I may ask, 'Why are you doing this?' And they're able to tell me, but we look at data a lot.

Most of the principals had similar thoughts, trusting their veteran teachers to veer from the curriculum to meet student needs. However, there were limitations on rookie teachers, as they were still learning the curriculum and learning what students need to be successful. Jordan Wilson summed it up by saying:

When it comes to knowing the students who are in your classroom and how you need to meet their needs, you have to be flexible. And so, I have some teachers who are flexible, but then I had the majority who were like, 'Let me stick to the script.' I'm like, 'The script is not working. I'm not saying abandon it. That's never who I am. However, if you see that your children need something else to scaffold or support, do that.' I've always tried to give them freedom and show that I trust you, because you are the professional in your classroom and I trust you to have the best judgment for what your students' need. I may ask you a question and you should be able to give me an answer, but that doesn't mean you're in trouble.

The consensus of the interviewees is that teachers have the autonomy to make instructional decisions in their classroom. Still, when asked about why they are doing something, the teachers should be able to support their decisions with a reason and with data to prove student growth.

Data collection was common across all principals interviewed. When the data supported student growth and achievement, the principals celebrated their teachers for their hard work and to reinforce that what they are doing is working for the students in their classrooms. In addition, the celebratory approach bled into the teachers' instruction and motivated the principal, as explained by Kyle Miller:

We had a huge celebration last night. We had [a middle school] band here, all this stuff because we had our goal. I think that if I can empower my staff and they believe in their own skills and the skills of each other and lean on each other, then it will bleed into their teaching. And it empowers me too. It fills my bucket. So, really trusting and empowering my staff to do what they know is best for students.

Many of the principals understood the importance of celebrating their teachers' successes. Taylor Johnson of Gates Elementary explained their rationale behind celebrating their

teachers' successes, saying, "I think someone told me a long time ago, when people get a little taste of success, they don't like to let it go." By ensuring success is celebrated, these principals reinforce the belief that the teachers are the leaders in their classroom and that the good teaching practices they utilize will continue to reap positive results.

### Collegial Relationships

Collegial relationships among the staff help to support or change the culture of the school. Interestingly, the participants were split in their responses when asked about the status of the staff relationships on their campus. Three of the principals explained that collegial relationships were an area of growth on their campuses, while two strongly believed they had a strong culture of positive relationships among the staff.

One area that arose when discussing relationships was holding each other accountable for student growth and success. Drew Garcia explained that his staff wants the administrative team to "hold everybody accountable," and be honest with one another without allowing one's emotions to get involved. But Drew explained:

That's one of our collective commitments. We're going to hold each other mutually accountable, but not be rude about it. Like say, 'Hey, I notice you're slacking.' [My assistant principal and I] can be honest with each other, but I want that for my teachers. Some of them have really good relationships outside of school, and they don't want to hurt each other's feelings.

Drew Garcia explained further that upholding the campus collective commitments will be a focal point for the upcoming school year to ensure teachers hold each other mutually accountable.

Kyle Miller also discussed accountability, but it was discussed through the lens of the Teacher Incentive Allotment and additional funds that can be earned through that state-funded program.

Kyle explained that teachers want to keep their students because they "don't know who this teacher is" and they have to "remind everyone we're all certified." The struggle to hold each

other mutually accountable for student success led to distrust among some staff members at their campuses, as some teachers did not feel comfortable addressing one another, while others lacked the tact to do so respectfully. Further, teachers often took their work personally, and struggled to receive the feedback when they were not upholding the collective commitments.

Another point that transpired throughout the interview process was the lack of collaboration amongst teachers. Alex Brown admittedly found that they had difficulty in getting their staff to collaborate, especially in terms of veteran teachers working with other teachers rather than working in silos:

For new teachers coming in, and especially veteran teachers, it's breaking them of that habit of 'you-do-not' on this campus. You do not plan behind closed doors. You plan with your team. You collaborate with them. This is the way we do things.

Distrust was a common theme in the conversation with Alex Brown, the newest principal. King Elementary has had several years of turnover at the principal position. The lack of stability at the leadership position could be the main cause of the level of distrust on that campus. Kyle Miller also reiterated the struggle they are having with their teams collaborating, finding that they “do struggle with some of our newbies and our veterans really just collaborating.” They constantly remind their staff that “these are all of our kids.” Collaboration and accountability will continue to be a challenge if the teachers and staff do not have strong collegial relationships.

The principals of Chandler Elementary and Gates Elementary strongly believed their teachers and staff had strongly developed relationships with one another, which allowed for high levels of collaboration and support. Jordan Wilson, principal of Chandler Elementary, claimed that they “have a culture where people are willing to help each other out,” which has led to a strong culture. Taylor Johnson seconded this statement, finding that shared camaraderie and a culture of support have improved working conditions at their campus:

I have a really good team that puts together different things throughout the year to kind of make it okay to work here. We have a sunshine committee, but the thing that I think keeps them there is the support of old, or veteran staff members pulling in novices. My campus is one that you can be new and if someone sees you struggling, they're going to step up and help you out. Whether it is your mentor, me, or anybody. It's just the culture that I found here. And it has just grown stronger.

Both Jordan Wilson and Taylor Johnson acknowledged that their teams also collaborate, planning for small group and whole group instruction together. Jordan Wilson explained that some of their grade levels plan together and that it has "made a difference" due to the growth that took place:

We have our PLC time together because they have the same planning. So, they're hearing things ... and their practice grows as you can see how other people are being successful with things they're doing in their rooms.

Taylor Johnson also noted that at their campus "you're not going to be alone," stating:

We're not going to just let you struggle unless you don't take what we're giving you. But if you're willing to grow and you're willing to learn, you're going to get a lot of support along the way.

Both principals strongly believe in their school's culture and their ability to lead and support their new teachers and their veteran teachers. Through the support of the teachers and the collaborative structures in place at Gates and Chandler elementary schools, the principals believe their staff hold each other accountable. This accountability has led to a sense of shared responsibility and academic growth across their campuses. According to Jordan Wilson,:

We're family. We support each other. So in that support, we also hold each other accountable and that's been a growth process. I can see the growth in that like holding each other accountable, understanding that the students assigned in my homeroom, those are not my only students. All students are mine. So I'm here to work to make sure everyone is successful.

This was accomplished through open and honest conversations among the staff, per Jordan Wilson.

Furthermore, both Taylor Johnson and Jordan Wilson believe that their staff trust them.

As stated by Taylor Johnson:

I believe 100% that my staff trusts me. They might not like everything I do, but I believe deep in my heart that my staff trusts me to the point where I can lead them where I need them to go.

Jordan Wilson further explained that if they know someone is passionate about a particular subject or topic, or if they want to move into a different area of education, they will support them by inviting them to participate on different decision-making committees. From the conversations had with the principals of Gates Elementary and Chandler Elementary, the leaders firmly believe that their campus culture is one that supports teachers, encourages accountability, and drives achievement.

#### Professional Learning Communities

Every principal interviewed discussed professional learning communities (PLCs) and how they are utilized on their campuses to improve student achievement and build teacher capacity. Most principals identified cultural and procedural changes that were required for successful PLCs on their campus, while some spoke of the challenges of the PLC process on their campus. Nevertheless, every principal spoke about the importance of PLCs on their campus and the role they have played in the success of the students and the school. Drawing from the four guiding questions that inform the work of PLCs, Morgan Williams, Eureka Elementary's principal, stated:

When done correctly, professional learning communities are the number one way to improve student performance because not only do you take the time to lesson study and learn [about] your students, but those four guiding questions are really the way to teach, the way to plan, and the way to move kids forward.

Jordan Wilson echoed a similar sentiment, noting that their staff studied to learn “what it really means to be a PLC and [they’re] getting closer and closer to that every day.” Drew Garcia also

believed that their team was on their way to becoming a PLC, yet emphasized: “We all have to do things different” noting the cultural changes that are required to become a PLC.

Each of the principals spoke about the changes that were made to improve the collaboration and work they do on their campuses. The principals of Gates Elementary, Everest Elementary, and King Elementary all spoke about a two-to-three-week cycle of data collection, data analysis, planning, and implementation to move student achievement forward. Alex Brown, King Elementary’s principal spoke about areas of academic focus and data analysis they utilized:

We look at our data from formative assessments every two or three weeks. Grade levels have set goals anywhere from just focusing on high frequency words to phonics. And then they create their own assessments based off of that. We take the assessments because we obviously want to make sure they’re there. Then we bring that back to our PLC to be able to celebrate.

Taylor Johnson, Gates Elementary’s principal, encouraged their staff to focus on essential academic standards to monitor throughout the year. This helped guide their work. They said:

I also think the thing that we did was picking out just a few ... high impact essential standards and that’s all we focused on, which has helped us because it helps us narrow our focus on what it is we’re going to do. And I think us monitoring what we do every other week. We’re on a two-week rotation. And so, every other week you have to bring back student work and we look at it and we see where we need to go based on what the students actually did.

By creating a data collection, data analysis, and implementation cycle, these principals felt that their teachers provided opportunities for their students to succeed. A few principals also spoke about how the teachers have also benefited from the collaborative structures that were put into place, and are continuing to develop their skills and capacity to instruct students with various instructional needs. Morgan Williams identified this on their campus, saying:

In the times that we meet, we have done more of helping teachers build their toolbox, rather than us ... having a lot of tools and sharing those tools and becoming better. It’s more of the coaches and administrators helping to build those toolboxes before we can get to a point of the teachers having those conversations.



Thus, the leaders of campuses need to be aware of their students' needs, but also of their teachers' needs as they strive to create collaborative structures and improve student achievement opportunities.

Five of the six principals interviewed reported that they had made a change to the daily master schedule to support student growth and achievement. Each of the principals implemented a time for students to receive multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), formerly known as Response to Intervention. The work done in the PLCs had major implications for the work that was done during MTSS time. Kyle Miller explained how MTSS works on their campus, eliminating the label of a "Tier II student":

We came up with a whole new program. We call it What I Need. And every teacher ... touches every student. And we track every child on this campus. If you need phonics instruction, CVC words, then you go to that group. And another teacher may be teaching you that if you need multiplication and division, then that's what you're working on. And so, instead of saying, you're a Tier II student and you're going over here, you're a student that needs to work on this and you're going over here.

Three other leaders talked about a scheduled time on their campus to target student needs as well. Though the scheduled time was named something different across all campuses, the principals who implemented this practice on their campuses discussed how a designated MTSS time has impacted the daily work they do. According to Taylor Johnson, "We're working smarter instead of harder." Additionally, Drew Garcia spoke about what was observed during walkthroughs and how hard teachers were working to catch students up on what they missed due to COVID:

I was walking around doing walkthroughs and we stopped in first grade during their [MTSS] time and all the groups of students, they were working so hard. Teachers were working hard and it's like we had light bulb moments because the kids, you know, they lost so much because of COVID.

Further, Chandler Elementary's principal, Jordan Wilson, also reiterated the importance of a

scheduled MTSS time and how it has seeped into the culture of their school:

We were able to get together and make changes to our schedule that we needed to make, which we have a time in the morning and a time in the afternoon. And we have teachers moving around the building and kids moving around the building. So that's where we are in our culture. Right now, we know that all of our students are all of our responsibility, we know that our work matters, our planning matters. And I see people more willing to answer the difficult questions. This is information. No one is in trouble. It's just information. And we're all trying to improve daily.

Morgan Williams also talked about how there was a cultural shift on their campus that included their development as a PLC, saying, "It's every day, all day long. It's who we are. It's not a thing we do." The work these leaders and their teachers have put into the PLC process has improved their practice and has made the work the teachers are doing more efficient and effective.

#### Expectations of Teachers

Many of the principals who were interviewed shared that they had various expectations of their teachers. Some of the expectations included behavioral changes, while others were more focused on instruction. Two principals, Morgan Williams and Alex Brown, had less than three years of experience at their campuses and spoke mostly about the need to increase the behavioral expectations of their teachers and staff. Morgan Williams found that "expectations change the culture," explaining that those who cannot handle the change in expectations typically leave the campus, which allows for those who can accept the changes to replace them; thus, changing the culture of the school. Some of the expectations that were placed on the teachers were daily and after-school requirements. For example, Morgan Williams implemented several things on their campus, including:

Standing at your door to greet students, students walking in the hallway with the hall pass, where students walked [along] the line with their students, what the expectation is for students and teachers in the cafeteria, you know, some school-wide things.

They expounded on other expectations that changed teacher behaviors such as coming to school on time, looking presentable when at work, and not yelling at students. All of these behaviors changed the culture of the campus from their first year to the current year.

Three principals spoke about a mindset shift that was required and how the expectation of teachers and students affected that shift in thinking. When charged with supporting students, regardless of their behavioral and instructional needs, Drew Garcia explained:

I had one teacher that was like, ‘No, they have to take ownership too.’ I said, ‘I hear you, but they’re nine.’ And then I said, ‘But what can we do? What can we control? And what can we do?’ And so that year we redid the way we did intervention, especially for our kids who we know needed some targeted assistance.

Morgan Williams also observed that there had to be a mindset shift at their school, finding, “We have struggles. We have some things that we’d like to change, but we can do it. We can rise above our circumstances, so to speak.” Alex Brown also had to change the minds of the teachers on his campus; more specifically, feeling sorry for kids instead of helping them:

There were some mindsets that we had to make sure that were eliminated. We also have, what I use is the term, the ‘pobrecito’ mindset. We have quite a bit of that. And we have really pushed our teachers this year to get that out of their vocabulary. I’m going to be looking at your data. I’m going to be emailing you about your data and talking to you about your kids.

Once these behavioral expectations were set, the teachers understood that their leaders would be looking to make sure they were implemented and that no excuses were allowed when it came to student success. Further, once the behavioral expectations were established, the principals could focus more on honing the instructional expectations that were necessary for students to be successful in their schools.

Jordan Wilson and Kyle Miller had several years of experience at their campuses and when pressed about teacher expectations, both spoke about the implementation of instructional expectations on their campuses. These leaders posed probing questions to their teachers and

pushed their teachers to consider what had been done and what could be done differently to meet student needs. Both leaders also elaborated on goal setting and tracking student data as an essential component of the work they expect their teachers to do. Jordan Wilson stated:

I think, over time, it's seeing trends ... because we look at data so much, but identifying those trends and asking, "What do you see?" and "Why do we see those things?" I mean, just asking difficult questions that people need to answer and then not just accepting the answer they give but pushing back, saying, "This is the situation, but have we done this? What have we done?" We're constantly meeting. We're constantly setting goals for students. And when we don't make those goals, [we ask], "What did we do? Did we keep our agreements?"

Kyle Miller also explained that goal setting and data tracking is a central tenant to the work they do at their campus:

All my students track their goals. All my teachers track their goals. They all have goals, and we visit, and we meet, and we say, "Okay, take out your formative assessments. How are your kids growing? How are they doing?" We are consistently having conversations of how kids are moving and growing.

While goal setting with students and teachers was a shared expectation, Jordan Wilson also identified lesson planning and turning in lesson plans as important to the success of the students and teachers on their campus. After realizing that rigor was lacking when observing teachers, Jordan implemented a lesson planning template that required teachers to document when they would ask certain questions to help students dig more deeply into their thinking, when students would be talking to one another in partnerships or groups, and the structure of the lesson. Both leaders strongly believed that these instructional expectations changed the culture of the school in a positive way, as they believed it led to an increase in student achievement.

### Hiring Practices

The hiring practices of the principals interviewed were both unique and similar. The way the principals screened and interviewed candidates and involved their staff in hiring was unique, but the characteristics they were looking for in the teachers they hired were relatively similar.

When preparing to screen and interview candidates, however, some of the turnaround leaders involved their staff, while others did not. Alex Brown and Drew Garcia utilized a hiring committee or group of individuals whom they consulted when preparing for a job fair or a candidate search. Alex Brown utilized questionnaires to send out to their team to find out what the team was looking for:

I send out a quick questionnaire to my team. I ask, “What are you looking for in your teammates? About how many years of experience do you want the person to come with?” And then I send out the interview questions and ... I let them know there are the general [questions]. What is specific to your grade levels that you would like to add? What are some things that need to be taken away? So, I actually do use quite a bit of teacher direction in it because I want to make sure at the end of the day, it wasn't [me] who said you're working with this person. There's a whole group that said we support this person.

Involving their staff was important to Alex Brown, as that was the culture they were trying to build on their campus. Drew Garcia also involved their team, explaining, “I take the voices from the people that have been here ... I take their feedback and listen to what they say.” Involving the staff in the interview process can be empowering and can lead to teachers supporting one another.

Morgan Williams, principal of Eureka Elementary, admitted that they had not included teachers in the hiring process, but was looking to do so in the future:

I have not involved teachers as much as I probably will this year, because my first year, I needed to try to make sure I got as good as I could get. Sometimes, when you involve teachers and staff in the hiring, there's a lot of emotion in it. This year, I'm more likely to involve more staff in the hiring because I feel like we have a good amount of teachers that see the vision and believe in what we're trying to do.

The choice to involve teachers and staff in the hiring process can influence the culture and morale of the school. Including staff in the decision-making process can help build morale, as they believe they have influence; however, if there are people who do not have the same vision and mission as the leader, it can lead to a culture shift, especially if they are not hiring for the

same qualities and characteristics.

Every principal spoke at length about the qualities they looked for in a candidate. Some of the characteristics were similar across the participants, while others were different. Two qualities dominated the discussion I had with the participants during our interviews: grit and emotional intelligence.

Several principals discussed the importance of grit in a candidate. Drew Garcia explained that they are straight-forward with a candidate when they are interviewing them, expressing the struggles and benefits of working at their school:

I'm honest ... and I tell them what they're getting into. It's not all unicorns and rainbows. That's just not what it is. That's not who we are. I tell them, 'If you're looking for a perfect school and a perfect principal, this is not the place for you. Are you looking for a school where you will grow, you will get challenged and you will be challenged, and you're going to make a big difference? Then this is the place to be.'

Taylor Johnson also spoke about the challenges of working at their school and finding the right person who is unwilling to give up, even when things become challenging:

You've got to have a love for the underdog. You've got to have a love for a kid that has no shot in hell other than you. I think that's my major thing. I look for someone who, when things get hard, they don't keep it in and let it fester. But they have that kind of attitude, that gritty attitude.

Kyle Miller also found that they look for candidates who are passionate about teaching but are also willing to stick it out when things become difficult. They noted:

I want to know if you have a passion for it. I can teach you the content. I can coach you through things, but if you don't have the grit, then that's hard. And that's what I see a lot of our new hires struggling with. The work is hard and then they say, "This isn't worth it."

Drew Garcia explained at length the importance of grit and perseverance in their staff. They knew they could teach curriculum and content, but were unable to teach grit, passion, and perseverance:

I also look for people who are passionate, who love kids. Not just to sound cliché, but who really, really love kids. We look to hire for fit because I can teach you. We can teach you the curriculum. We can teach you how to teach a lesson, how to teach a mini lesson. We can teach you. We can teach you that. We can give you the professional development. We can coach you. We can do all of that, but there are certain skills that I can't teach somebody. And I share this with them. I can't teach you to like the hard kid. I can't teach you that some days, you're going to be exhausted, but it's okay because we're going to come back tomorrow. I can't teach you grit. I can't teach you perseverance.

The willingness to stick it out when the work became difficult was spoken about at length, as many of the schools that are in need of turnaround leadership have more challenges than those who are not in a turnaround situation. Finding teachers who have a gritty attitude is important to the success of the students, the culture, and the campus.

Another characteristic that was discussed was emotional intelligence. Morgan Williams identified this trait when screening candidates because they know that they can teach content, but cannot teach how to be a good person:

I look for a lot of emotional intelligence. Sometimes that's more important than academic intelligence because that piece, that's what we have coaches for. That's what we have training for. I can't teach you how to be a good person that you have to be. It far outweighs your academic intelligence, having a good heart and having love for people no matter what they look like and where they come from. I can change your mind. I can't change your heart.

Two other principals spoke about the importance of finding teachers who are passionate about working with children, especially those who come from low-income backgrounds. Taylor Johnson also spoke at length about the importance of emotional intelligence and knowing how to build relationships with students:

I just really believe you have to work very, very hard at building really deep relationships with kids, and not superficial ones. Our kids can tell right off the bat if you really love them or if you don't. You've got to be passionate about these kids being successful, passionate about building relationships, and passionate about, whether you give me a hard time or not, I'm still coming back. Your success drives my success.

Drew Garcia summed it up, saying they look for "soft skills" when interviewing

candidates, because the other skills necessary for teaching, such as lesson planning and best practices, are skills that can be taught. Interestingly, many of the principals explained that they changed their screening and interviewing questions to reflect the emotional intelligence, passion, and grit they are looking for. Further, two principals felt that it's a "gut feeling" when they are interviewing, and they feel like they "just know" whether a candidate could be successful at their campus or not.

### Mentoring and Onboarding

When asked about the onboarding and mentoring processes that were in place at their campuses, all principals expressed that they did not believe their mentoring and onboarding programs were effective. Two types of mentoring and onboarding were discussed: culture and instruction, and the principals' perceptions of each were also reviewed.

Most of the principals explained that they had a relatively new staff, with more and more new teachers being added each year. The reasons that teachers were leaving are varied and discussed in further detail in Chapter 5, but campus administrators acknowledged that they replaced teachers yearly and tried to get them into the fold of the campus as quickly as possible. Kyle Miller shared about meeting with their new teachers once a month throughout the school year to get a pulse on the teachers and see how everyone is doing. These administrators also met with the teachers individually once a semester to check in with them, asking them their goals and future plans, and giving and getting feedback. The principal of Garden Ridge Elementary also explained that they differentiated for their rookie teachers and those who were simply new to the campus:

If you're a first-year teacher, I will go in and just coach you on your room. Where do kids sit? What are all the dynamics of your room? Because it is so ... overwhelming ... If you've taught for five or six years, I expect you have that down. So, I'm going to go in and really look at content.



Taylor Johnson described a well-planned mentoring program, where teachers met once a month to discuss teacher moves and to review important information and upcoming dates and procedures. However, they struggled to believe in its effectiveness:

I don't think the new teacher program that we did really meet the needs of the people who we hired. The onboarding was really good in that we loved on them, and we had a reception for them. We wanted to make them feel wanted, but I don't think that was enough to give them the tools to walk in those classrooms and deal with some of the things that they would have to deal with in trying to get kids to learn.

When asked, each principal was reflective in their responses, acknowledging that things did not go as well as they hoped, but they were looking to implement changes for the upcoming year to ensure the new teachers were onboarded successfully and felt prepared to face most of the challenges that would arise.

Instruction was an important component that arose during my conversations with the turnaround principals. Taylor Johnson explained that they would look at the structure of instruction on their campus:

We unpack TEKS. What does [sic] the structure of small group and what is it supposed to look like? What are some of your options? We throw them in there and they get the kids and they're like, oh, what am I supposed to do? Even though they have lesson plans. I think just having a clear understanding of how it runs would have been a lot better.

Morgan Williams believed that their instructional coaches prepared the teachers for teaching and helped them prepare their lessons. However, they admitted that the administrative team failed to teach "the things that aren't on the lesson plan," like how to respond to a student who is upset, what to do when the class needs a social-emotional lesson instead of the academic lesson that is planned, and how to implement an individualized education plan for a student, elaborating:

Unfortunately, when it comes to the state test, we've become so hard. We have to get this done. We have to pass this test. And we forget that they're kids. And I think as much as we want to build the capacity of teachers and have them be great teachers so that the kids

can pass the test, we also need to build their capacity and have them be great teachers so that their kids remember something other than the test.

Alex Brown expressed belief that their administrative and instructional leadership teams did a great job of onboarding their new staff members with the culture of data analysis and lesson planning, as well as lesson plan implementation. They noted:

I give time to coaches to really be able to get their lesson planning up to speed, to get their small groups up to speed, look at and understand how we look at data, how we evaluate things from various lenses to work on essential standards, to work on materials gathering, or working on a new skill set for the teacher. I think it's helped a lot in our new teacher capacity. Our newer teachers are strong and a little more committed than I would expect to have seen in a type of year that we are in.

They believe this work was so effective that they are planning on implementing a similar structure in the upcoming school year for their new teachers, though none of the participants explicitly stated exactly what they had planned on implementing.

Onboarding was an important step for the administrators interviewed, as well as developing a mentor program that was effective for their campus. While each principal felt that they had room to grow, some principals felt that they were moving in the right direction in developing their new teachers into people who are willing to stay on the campus and establish a high-quality teaching and learning culture.

### Parent and Community Support

Every principal interviewed spoke of the importance of parent and community support. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the schools kept their doors closed to visitors and had minimal parent or community events to help keep infections in the school down; however, BRISD began allowing families into the schools toward the end of the 2022 school year. When pressed about the involvement of parents at their schools, some of the principals had experience with parent support. Morgan Williams felt that trust needed to be established at their campus to

continue supporting their students:

I think that it'll be important for us to start by building trust with our parents and helping them understand, which I think a ton of them know, that we want what's best for their kids. We have a few that give a little more pushback than we'd like, but for the most part, I think we have parents that are willing to help, willing to be involved if they can.

While parent involvement can feel like a burden or a task to be completed, some of the principals acknowledged the importance of the relationship that can be developed by having night events at their schools and inviting parents into the building. Drew Garcia experienced the importance of parent relationships in the first year as a principal. They explained that there was a "culture of us against them, teachers against parents" when they first became the principal of the school. They had to change this belief, as Drew and their staff recognized the importance of parent support. Everest Elementary's principal explained that parent involvement will be a priority for the upcoming school year, noting, "Our parents will do whatever they can for kids," and capitalizing on that.

King Elementary's principal, Alex Brown, explained a situation where they utilized parent voice to make a procedural change to school dismissal procedures. Noticing traffic and crosswalk issues, Alex Brown invited parents to speak up about the concerns and shared the concerns with the city, which led to a new crosswalk and a crossing guard to be stationed. They knew the importance of involving the community in the decision-making process:

We're going to bring the community in to talk about the reason why we're doing this. It's going to allow some people to bring their voices into the conversation to be able to really start making some moves.

Alex also asked parents what mattered to them and what information they would like to receive, and many parents responded that they "needed help with behavior at home and with the resources that they can have within their community." By identifying parent needs and how to support parents, parents may begin to support their school, leading to more student success.

Two principals spoke about the importance of community partners with their school.

Taylor Johnson and Kyle Miller both have strong church, business, and community partners who supply students and families with things they need:

We have a lot of community sponsors ... and they're always reaching out asking, "What do you need?" They give backpacks, school supplies, materials for events. They donate candy for our carnival. They do lunches for our staff.

Taylor Johnson shared that their church partners did a back-to-school event and provided school supplies and backpacks to their students, which helped ensure every student had what they needed to be successful throughout the year. They also hosted two events a year where church and community partners worked together to provide food to families in need, especially during longer breaks from school. These community partners also provided lunches and appreciation gifts to the teachers at the school. While not every principal spoke about the community partners they had, these two principals understood the importance of their community partners and the benefit of their support.

The principals interviewed at six of the turnaround campuses in BRISD reported many behaviors and practices that support turnaround success. They were intentionally working to build and develop teacher capacity and efficacy, help their staffs develop and sustain collegial relationships, and collaborate in protected planning times. They had high expectations of their teachers to do what is right for students, intentionally hired staff members who would persist in the face of challenges, onboarded the new staff members to ensure they would be successful, and sought relationships with parents and community members to ensure the success of the students at their schools.

### Research Question 3

*What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?*

The six principals interviewed in BRISD indicated that they worked hard to ensure every student had an equitable opportunity to succeed. They also put practices into place to ensure that every future student who entered the school had an opportunity to succeed. When asked what supports needed to be put into place to sustain the improvements made, four major themes emerged: campus support, teacher support, behavior support, and parent support.

### Campus Support

Campus support was a theme addressed by every principal when they were asked to identify the supports needed to sustain the changes needed. There were several consistencies across the board, including personnel needs, instructional coaching support, student support, and financial support. The principals felt strongly about what they needed and believed it was possible to provide, especially because they believed the support would benefit students at their campus. These needs included extra administrative staff, such as assistant principals and counselors; social workers; and school psychologists to keep up with the ever-changing needs of the students attending turnaround schools. The turnaround administrators named additional staff to support students' behavioral needs as integral to the types of support they needed. Drew Garcia discovered the school staff was sometimes unprepared to handle the social and emotional needs of their students, which affected the administrators' ability to support learning and instruction:

We had [new students] that came with all kinds of trauma and issues. We spent a lot of time with kids whose parents were in jail, kids who were staying with grandparents because they were out of the care of their mom and dad, kids who were in CPS custody, kids who were staying with aunts and uncles, kids who had just lost their parents through a traumatic issue. We were not prepared for that. We needed some help. We need somebody other than me and the assistant principal to help teach ... proper replacement behaviors. Because that's all we were spending our time with. We weren't spending a lot of time giving feedback. We weren't doing the instructional work.

In that instance, Drew Garcia received the support they had requested, but often, requests went unfulfilled for a variety of reasons. Taylor Johnson believed that an additional administrator would benefit their campus, especially with the number of students and the needs of the students at their campus, expressing:

I do believe that I would need, which ... I have another counselor. I mean I have a position for another counselor. I just don't have one. I have a position that I can't fill right now.

Thus, the position was provided for this principal, but an educator shortage left them unable to fill open positions, causing a strain on the staff as they tried to meet the needs of the teachers and students on their campus.

Alex Brown also believed that they should receive support from the district and other outside resources:

It has to become about support where we're really moving the needle forward. I do believe in the power of consultants and good consultants. So being able to hire consultants to take a look at blind spots that are on your campus. Taking a look at those systems where maybe you aren't quite there. Taking a look at instructional practices and providing feedback that can help you move the needle forward.

The ability to hire consultants would come from the campus budget, which often is not large enough to support an external consultant.

Each of the principals could identify campus-level support they truly believed would benefit the students and staff at their campus. Unfortunately, due to budgetary or other reasons, these personnel could not be hired. Such budgetary constraints added an extra strain on campus leaders and the teams that supported them, as these needs often prevented them from fulfilling their roles as instructional leaders on their campus.

When asked what supports were necessary to sustain the work of turning around their campuses, every principal stated they wanted more instructional support for their teachers. In

BRISD, there are instructional coaches for mathematics, monolingual reading, bilingual reading, science, and social studies; however, due to the budgetary structure of the coaches and the funds through which they are paid, all the reading coaches are split between two or more campuses. The social studies and science coaches are split between all the elementary campuses, serving more than a dozen each. Alex Brown believed that instructional coaches benefit the culture of the campus:

I feel like coaches can really help build a community. Consistency is key, especially just moving teachers from one direction to another.

The principals spoke about how they had a full-time mathematics coach, or a coach who was specifically assigned to their campus. Two principals explicitly stated that they believed their mathematics data reflected their mathematics coach was working full-time on their campus, thus a benefit to students. Taylor Johnson understood the structure of the coaches' schedule, but did not want to share coaches, feeling that full-time instructional coaches could help develop teacher capacity:

I would like if I didn't split coaches and that I had a coach that was consistent on my campus every day. That would be a help ... because they're on my campus every other week. My math coach is the only one that stays with me all the time. And math has moved because she is on my campus all the time. So, I would like both a bilingual and a monolingual coach to just be mine. I think that would help, especially when you're talking about new people and onboarding and building capacity.

When asked about support needed to sustain the work, Drew Garcia laughingly said, "We would love to have a full-time language arts coach. Everybody wants full-time coaches." This sentiment is shared across turnaround principals, but it was shared among all principals, regardless of the need to turn the campus around. The need for instructional support was shared among every principal interviewed. They understood that their work would be in vain if they could not improve instructional practices and ensure students were growing academically.

Unfortunately, it was not always feasible to give the campuses what they needed, causing frustration and straining leaders as they attempted to meet student and teacher needs.

Unsurprisingly, instructional needs of students came up as a support turnaround principals believed would be effective in continuing the work. Several ideas were shared, including the need for additional effective teachers, alternative pacing calendars for instruction, and effective resources for teachers from which to pull. Both Kyle Miller and Morgan Williams explained that small group instruction had been monumental in moving the work forward on their campuses but felt that more support in those areas would be effective. Morgan Williams expressed the importance of small class sizes:

I think we could benefit from having smaller class sizes or having two teachers [in a class], like 2 to 22 ratio. I think having the small group teachers ... has been beneficial. Having one per grade level is a good start, but if we had two per grade level, that would be even better.

Kyle Miller also believed smaller class sizes or small group instruction is more beneficial than the one to 22 ratio currently in place by TEA. They stated, “Small group instruction, you cannot beat it. You cannot beat putting six kids in a class versus 22.” These principals ensured that small group instruction was an essential part of their instructional day, modifying their master schedules to provide protected time for students to receive additional support in mathematics and language arts content. Morgan Williams also indicated that a modified pacing calendar would benefit their students, as they were not yet ready to maintain the same pacing calendar as the rest of the district.

Taylor Johnson had a unique response to the question posed. They believed that more money could attract high-quality candidates to their campus. Morgan Williams also explained that they believed the teachers hired on their campus needed to “be people who have a proven record of student growth and student achievement,” as they could help close academic gaps that



were present on their campus. Still, Taylor Johnson expounded on that idea further, explaining that giving teachers a large stipend could:

Attract teachers that would come to a campus like mine. We're going to take care of them if they come, but they have to come. I have to get strong teachers in there from the beginning. And I think [monetary support] would help me out dramatically.

They believed that stipends would entice high-quality teachers to work at turnaround schools, leading to rapid and dramatic change and giving students a chance to compete academically with students who did not attend turnaround schools.

The principals interviewed had very strong feelings about what types of campuswide support could benefit students. They could immediately state things needed; unfortunately, financial strains and personnel challenges prevented these schools from receiving the support they felt was desperately needed. One principal explained the challenges of leading a turnaround school without the necessary support, using an analogy. They said:

It's like trying to row down the river without a paddle. I'm going to get there eventually, as the waves are going to take me, but I might flip over. There may be water in the boat. I may go the wrong direction because I don't have what I need to get to where I need to be successfully. And who wants to risk drowning when you could just give me a paddle?

Turning a school around to ensure all students have an equitable opportunity is a challenging task. Still, many principals believed their turnaround efforts were made even more difficult by a lack of campuswide support for their students and teachers.

## Teacher Support

Several of the participants brought up teacher support as a means for sustaining the practices they had put into place. One principal leaned heavily on data when discussing teacher support, explaining that they wanted more involvement from the district leadership in celebrating the hard work the teachers put into place. Alex Brown felt that it would be a “shot of life to be

able to see their hard work pay off,” especially if their hard work was recognized by their teammates and staff members, as well as district leaders within BRISD.

Interestingly, most of the principals interviewed focused more on the soft skills of teacher support and struggled to pinpoint specific strategies, practices, or behaviors that could be implemented to make sure their teachers are supported. The principals provided several instances and personal opinions but were unable to specify their actions. One way they felt they could support their teachers is to “include different voices before [making] a decision,” as this participant felt that it would help their staff buy into the choice that was made. As I dug into the data, it appeared to be more about the perception of autonomy than giving them the autonomy. Taylor Johnson found that teacher perception was integral in supporting their staff:

What motivated people was us going in and giving them support so that they had the perception that they were being supported, which means going in and basically doing discipline for them. I believe that on a campus as high-needs as it is, you have to have people who understand that you’re going to support them in the things that they feel are important, and whether you actually do it, or give the perception that you’re doing it actually makes a difference with them.

Many of the turnaround leaders held similar beliefs. They expressed that their staffs’ perceptions and feelings were important and an integral part in their decision-making process.

Jordan Wilson explained that they tried to support their teachers by identifying their emotional needs:

You try to create a culture where everybody feels like they belong, and they can be successful, and you try to provide the support. I look at teachers like a teacher looks at their students. I have to learn each one of my staff member’s love language.

The emotional intelligence many of the administrators discussed or implied was evident in their desire to ensure all their teachers felt supported and cared for on their campuses. Taylor Johnson succinctly explained that teachers who felt they were unsupported and unappreciated would do one of two things: “They’re not going to do anything and instruction [will] stay in the

background or they will leave.” Providing high-quality teachers with the support and appreciation they need could inspire them to stay on their campus and provide educational opportunities for students in their classrooms. Unfortunately, there are times when campus and district leaders need to support teachers, even if that means that they must move on or leave the campus, as Jordan Williams expressed:

I always try to ask, “What do you want to do? What is your goal, long term?” And while I know I could be selfish and try to keep you, I try to help you grow and point you in the direction you need to go to so that you can live out your dream. That’s part of my job and I take it seriously. So even as people leave, I support them.

While the leaders interviewed said they tried to keep the great teachers on their campus, they also supported them in reaching their personal goals, even if it meant the school would suffer.

The importance of support or the perception of support was an underlying theme that emerged from the data after speaking with principals. They understood the challenges of providing support in ways that teachers believed were necessary, while also supporting their teachers in both personal and professional ways.

### Behavior Support

Behavior support was a common theme among several of the principals interviewed. They discussed how student behavior was one of the areas where they needed support if they were going to be able to continue making progress as turnaround leaders. Taylor Johnson explained that behavior affected the way they did their job each day:

No matter how hard you try to make sure all the routines and procedures and protocols are in place for you to do your job and for the school to run effectively, it depends on the day you walk in the building.

Taylor stated that they had solid routines and procedures, but some days, behavior consumed all of their time. Instead of spending time in the classrooms or attending to other priorities, they had to manage behavior and discipline. Morgan Williams also spoke about

behavior and the challenges it presented on their campus. They found that the behavior impeded the learning of other students and interfered with the teachers' ability to teach:

We've got kids kicking, screaming, and punching. We can't teach in that environment. We can't teach when you're flipping over chairs and yelling and cussing. We can't teach and no one can learn. I don't know how we [can] help support the kids who want to learn and the kids who have huge gaps in their learning—to close them, if we can't teach.

Morgan explained that not every student is kicking, screaming, and punching, but the disruptions that a few students cause throughout the school day make teaching and learning at their school incredibly difficult.

Because of the critical need for behavior support, the principals interviewed attempted to identify what one principal called “hot spots” and worked with teachers, staff, and students to provide procedures for those areas to run more smoothly. Social and emotional learning (SEL) also came up as an area of needed support to help sustain the changes made. Morgan Williams expressed the challenge they faced when supporting student behavior:

It's just about the SEL piece. Helping them understand, to regulate their emotions. It's such a tug of war because we're battling what they go home to every day.

Many of the principals felt that SEL support would mitigate many of the behaviors that they see and handle regularly. Taylor Johnson had similar feelings about their students, recognizing that their students need constant support to be successful:

I do believe that my kids have a bad reputation and start off with a deficit in life because of where they came from. It's not that they're bad kids. It's not that they can't succeed, once you put the right people in place and the right structures in place to help them be the best they can be.

Some of the right structures the participants felt would be effective at their campuses was additional behavior support, either in the form of another assistant principal, a behavior support teacher for students or a coach for teachers who need support, or a teacher to help support social and emotional learning. Additionally, some principals stated that having the right people on their

campus to implement instruction while handling behavior was imperative to the success of their campus. Taylor Johnson explained that their staff were “warriors and it’s kind of like if you’re not a warrior, then you can’t work here because it takes too much to be able to do” everything required to help students be successful.

### Parent Support

Parent support was another theme that emerged from the data collected. Interestingly, many of the principals found that their parents were and continue to be, for the most part, supportive of the work they do each day. The challenge, they found, is that parents struggle to navigate the school setting or do not have the proper skills or time to support their child’s learning at home. Kyle Miller expressed that many of their students come in unkempt and unprepared, not because their parents do not care, but because their parents are busy:

I do believe our parents are busy. They get their kid up and then they shoot them out the door because they have to go to work, or they work third shift and they’re still asleep. I know that a lot of their number one job is to pay rent. It’s a struggle. They put a lot of it on the school. The school will feed you. The school will take care of you, you know.

Many of the principals had similar feelings about the basic needs of the students attending their school. They want to help these families because of the students it will impact, but often found they did not have the immediate resources to support them without pulling out of their own wallet. Several administrators and staff will provide students with what they need, as Taylor Johnson pointed out, as their staff has provided shoes, clothes, and materials out of their own pockets for students. Working at turnaround campuses sometimes required staff to meet students’ basic needs before they could start meeting their educational needs. Nevertheless, meeting their educational needs was also a priority, thus pulling educators in a variety of directions to ensure students could be successful.

Parent and community training was addressed by two principals interviewed, especially

around behavior. Alex Brown explained that there are and continue to be a lot of “training barriers” at their school, especially when it comes to parents coming to the school to speak with someone about their student’s education. They explained that parents seemed to feel that they could go up to the school at any time to speak with their child’s teacher or an administrator, only to be yelled at for telling them to set up an appointment:

I have parents who come in the office first thing and start yelling at my office staff and I have to ask them to leave. I tell them we can have this conversation another time and then they start coming at me like I’m doing something wrong.

Alex indicated that he is grateful that their parents are passionate about their student’s needs while at school, but also wanted parents to understand that they cannot drop everything to support them at any moment during the day. Eureka Elementary’s principal, Morgan Williams believed, however, that the school and its staff could not just give resources to parents and expect them to follow through; parents needed to understand the importance of how to regulate their emotions and behavior:

Let me help you understand why this is important or why this is a life skill, because guess what? [Student] behavior is learned. They’re 5, 6, 7, 8, what maybe 11? 11 years of their life, their behavior is learned. And it’s not always their fault that they are who they are.

By training parents on how to navigate the school system and explaining to them why they should or should not do something, many of the turnaround principals felt this would benefit their students exponentially as they continued their educational journey. Drew Garcia shared that, as principals, they will ask for forgiveness later and will do what needs to get done to help the students at their school:

It’s not just academics that we’re trying to turn around. We’re trying to turn around things in the community. We’re trying to turnaround systems. Like all these systems. The community systems, the school systems, the state systems, and the school district systems. And so sometimes, it’s just not waiting. It’s just going ahead and just, you know what, I might not be getting support from whoever I need it from, so we’re just going to go ahead. We’re going to do it. I’ll ask for forgiveness later for getting in trouble for it. I

think the biggest thing is having an unwavering commitment and doing things you know are right for kids. No matter if you get pushback or not.

Thus, the work of a turnaround principal is challenging and can be frustrating, especially if the proper supports are not in place to help students succeed. Nevertheless, each of these principals indicated the belief that they possess an unwavering commitment to ensure students at their school are successful, regardless of their circumstances.

### Summary

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and understand turnaround leadership behaviors that are exhibited at campuses in need of targeted support, as identified by TEA. I collected data through semi-structured interviews with six campus principals to gain more insight into their beliefs, practices, and behaviors. Afterwards, I analyzed these data using multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding. This chapter included a discussion of the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase of this study.

Chapter 5 includes a summary and discussion of the results, as well as conclusions based on the findings of the data analysis. Further, I interpret the results as they relate to the study's relevant research literature and the conceptual framework that was developed. Chapter 5 also includes a discussion of the implications of this study, recommendations for further study, and a researcher reflection.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In an attempt to ensure equitable educational opportunities were provided to all students, the federal legislature passed the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA], 2015). In response, Texas's legislature passed House Bill 22 ([HB22], 2017), developing a state accountability system that provided a letter grade to all schools and local education agencies based on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. As a result, letter grades are given annually and remain in effect for the year, with expectations that school leaders take specific steps to maintain or improve the school's letter grade. Schools that are given a D or an F are charged with developing and implementing immediate changes to improve their letter grade. Thus, the need for turnaround school leadership arises.

This chapter contains a summary of the qualitative research study I conducted, and the conclusions related to the findings reported in Chapter 4. Additionally, the findings are connected to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Finally, this chapter provides implications for practice; recommendations for future study; and a researcher reflection pertaining to the reason I chose to conduct this study, lessons learned, and future plans related to the results and discoveries made in conjunction with the study.

#### Summary of the Study

This exploratory phenomenological qualitative study was developed to identify and understand behaviors exhibited by turnaround principals at elementary schools that have been identified as in need of improvement through the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) A-F accountability system. I also attempted to determine if the behaviors exhibited could provide equitable educational opportunities over the long-term. Finally, I examined elementary



principals' accounts of their experiences working at turnaround campuses with the aim to identify behaviors and practices that proved effective to inform campus and district leaders.

In this study, I interviewed six campus principals who were leading turnaround schools.

The interview protocol was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are principals' perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?
2. To what extent are leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?
3. What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?

Blue Ridge Independent School District (BRISD) (pseudonym) was selected as the research site for this study for two reasons. At the time this study was conducted, BRISD had a diverse student population, with schools meeting a variety of student needs, and was composed of nearly 30 elementary schools, serving over 12,000 students in pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Nearly two-thirds of students in BRISD were identified as economically disadvantaged with over 50% are considered at-risk. Additionally, the district was minority-rich, as of over 70% of the student population is composed of African American and Hispanic students (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Second, there was and continues to be an urgent need to determine what practices are or need to be in place at turnaround schools, as nine schools in BRISD were identified as in need of targeted support by TEA when this study was conducted. Three elementary schools in BRISD were out of compliance with HB22, due to their academic status of a D or an F given prior to TEA's withholding of letter grades (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Additionally, the principals at the nine elementary schools had been at their schools for five years or less, with some principals having two years or less of experience at their campuses. These principals were deemed turnaround principals for their mission to generate "rapid and

dramatic change in schools to reverse the continuation of adverse effects on students” (Hitt et al., 2019, p. 191).

Qualitative data were collected from six BRISD principals. These principals led campuses deemed in need of targeted support or had a letter rating of a D or F. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted over a three-month span to identify practices and behaviors the principals exhibit, to report their efficacy as turnaround leaders, and to determine the longevity of the practices that are in place.

When analyzing the data, I engaged in multiple data analysis cycles. First, the data were analyzed using deductive themes identified through the literature review. The themes were principal self-efficacy, shared mission and vision, hiring practices, collegial relationships, parent and community support, teacher capacity and efficacy, and campus-level support. When I reviewed the data through the lens of these themes, I was able to identify patterns across the six participants. During the initial coding phase, I also noticed trends across all participants that were not part of my initial coding set. From leadership practices to thoughts and feelings, I began to identify codes that emerged from the participants, allowing me to code inductively. The codes that emerged from the participants were professional learning communities, expectations of teachers, mentoring and onboarding, parent support, student behavior, and teacher motivation and support.

Because many of the participants identified similar behaviors and practices they employed and similar thoughts and feelings, I was able to report both direct quotes and overarching ideas that emerged from the interviews. Administrators’ direct quotes provided their exact feelings and additional insight into their passion, practices, struggles, and successes.

Overarching ideas were typically shared among several participants and were a summary of the participants' views.

## Discussion

Every child deserves the opportunity to earn a high-quality education, regardless of their current or past circumstances. Educators and researchers, as well as some informed legislators, identify the importance of every student having the opportunity to succeed. Thus, federal and state policies have been created and reformed to provide high-quality learning opportunities for all students, including the federally mandated ESSA (2015) and Texas's state mandated HB22 (2017). While the intention of both policies and many others like them may have been pure, the resulting consequences are that many schools who are compliant with ESSA (2015) and HB22 (2017) serve students from predominantly upper- and middle-class families, while those who are out of compliance most often serve students from low-income backgrounds (Hamilton et al., 2014; Pazey et al., 2015). In Texas, HB22 (2017) allows schools a limited amount of time to make the changes necessary; therefore, school district leaders must identify individuals with effective leadership practices to make the drastic and rapid changes that are necessary to ensure the school complies with state and federal mandates (Hitt et al., 2019). Thus, the need for turnaround leadership arises.

Using the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) website, I identified nine schools in one average-sized school district that needed targeted support. TEA classifies schools needing targeted support based on state-assessment data, noting campuses that "have consistently underperforming student groups" (Texas Education Agency, 2020a, p. 2) for three consecutive years. While the studied district did not name or classify the campuses as turnaround campuses, the behaviors and changes of district and campus leaders aligned with turnaround leadership

behaviors. The practices and behaviors were then organized to answer this study's research questions. The next section includes a discussion of the themes in relation to the research questions of this study, as well as a connection to relevant literature that oriented this study.

#### Research Question 1

*What are principals' perceptions about how their ability to lead as a turnaround principal to improve opportunities for student achievement?*

A principal's perception of their ability to lead as a turnaround principal has a significant relationship to their ability to lead. Additionally, a high level of resilience and perseverance must be evident if they are to be successful and continue the work, even when faced with the daunting challenges that can arise (Bandura, 1993; Goddard et al., 2017). Additionally, successful principals must establish and adhere to a mission and vision. Further, they must encourage their faculty and staff to take ownership of the mission and vision (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Thomas et al., 2020). Principal self-efficacy and a shared mission and vision were two themes that emerged from the literature and from the data collected in this study as important to a principal's perception of their ability to lead as a turnaround principal.

Principals working in turnaround schools must exhibit high levels of perseverance and resilience to ensure improvement in academic achievement opportunities for students and increased instructional expectations for teachers and staff (Goddard et al., 2017). Bandura (1993) identified four characteristics that influence efficacy beliefs: conception of ability, social comparison influences, feedback, and perceived controllability. Conception of ability was observed in three of the six participants in this study. They were confident in their ability to lead their campuses and to make the changes necessary to improve student achievement outcomes and educational opportunities for their students. Further, they reported sharing the responsibility of educating the students with their teachers and staff, encouraging them to lead various

committees to improve the campus and educational opportunities for students. Turnaround leaders in BRISD also reported the importance of feedback in leading their campuses. Whether the feedback is from district leaders, their staff, or parents, feedback was inadvertently reported as a key component to their belief in their abilities to lead. Finally, perceived controllability was reported by every participant. The leader's ability to influence their environment, encourage positive behaviors, and deter negative behaviors from both students and staff improved their belief in their ability to lead. Each of the participants had an opinion about their ability to control their environment but acknowledged that they were unable to control outside influences, such as parents and district leadership. While many of the participants reported situations when they needed support in controlling their environment, they all asserted their ability to control what happened inside the school, from student behaviors to teacher and staff behaviors. Social comparison influences were not observed or reported by the participants, nor did I explicitly ask about how this component of efficacy influenced their ability to lead.

Bandura's (1993) work has great implications for campus and district leaders who are looking to turn around a school that is struggling. One aspect that district leaders should be aware of is the ability of the leader to make change; they must be a change agent if they are to turn the school around. District leaders who recognize the four characteristics that Bandura identified will be able to find campus leaders who have the potential to turn be a change agent and turn the school around. When facing the daunting task of improving a school's academic performance, a leader who has a strong conception of their ability as a principal could be a strong candidate for the job. Combined with a strong conception of ability, leaders who utilize social comparison influences, feedback from peers and superiors, and perceived controllability have the potential to be a successful turnaround leader. Additionally, leaders must also exhibit high levels

of perseverance and resilience when attempting to turn around a school (Goddard et al., 2017). All the principals interviewed for this study exhibited high levels of perseverance and resilience, even though it was evident that some participants were exhausted from pouring themselves into the work of turning around their campuses. District and turnaround leaders must understand the incredible amount of work that goes into dramatically improving a school and provide the resources and supports necessary for success.

For decades, researchers have found that a shared mission and vision is essential for significant changes and success in schools (Hitt & Player, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Every participant in this study discussed a mission and vision, which was shared among the staff and drove their actions and decisions. Additionally, every principal explained that their mission and vision was aligned with BRISD's mission and vision. While their mission and vision were aligned, some participants explained that their mission and vision was based on the students at the school. Four of the principals interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of relationships with students, families, and community members in achieving the mission and vision of the campus. This belief was studied in Copland's (2003) study, where they found that strong relationships help communicate the mission and vision effectively and in a way that makes sense to all stakeholders.

Two principals in this study explained the importance of data in achieving their mission and vision for their students. While they highlighted the importance of relationships, the participants leaned heavily on data points and progress monitoring to ensure students were growing and achieving at high levels. Evidence of student learning was essential for these administrators as they monitored their progress toward their goals. Freeman and Fields (2020) and Hitt and Player (2019) found that this was an effective practice in reaching the mission and

vision for the school, as goals were set that were attainable and easily tracked. Further, the researchers found that data collection and analysis allowed for leaders to monitor progress and adjust the mission and vision as goals were met.

Principal self-efficacy and a mission and vision that is shared among staff members is imperative to a principal's ability to lead as a turnaround principal, as identified in Copland's (2003) theory of action for school turnaround and turnaround leaders. Turnaround efforts require high levels of perseverance and resilience, as well as the ability to disrupt and remove barriers to change. Additionally, turnaround leaders need to communicate effectively with district leaders, staff members, families, and community members to share the leader's mission and vision for the campus and students, as well as to express campus needs. All the participants in this study exhibited high levels of perseverance and resilience, even when they were required to make rapid and dramatic change. Additionally, the participants were able to express their mission and vision with the belief that they could achieve their goals.

## Research Question 2

*To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?*

Several important factors go into ensuring a school is successful, especially the practices and behaviors of the campus principal. The principals who participated in this study exhibited many of the important factors that benefit students, increase student achievement, improve student growth, and improve the school's letter grade given by TEA. Each of the factors highlighted in this study impacted the campus culture and can improve achievement opportunities or derailed current practices. All six BRISD principals who participated in this study reported the importance of hiring practices, mentoring and onboarding of new teachers, collegial relationships among the staff, professional learning communities (PLCs), teacher

capacity and efficacy, teacher expectations, and parent and community support as important influences in their culture, effecting their attempt to turn their school around.

Principals leading turnaround schools have several challenges. One of the biggest and often unnoticed challenges is the ability to hire high-quality candidates. When teachers are given the option to work at a low-performing or a high-performing school, they typically choose the high-performing school, due to the daunting task of educating students who are significantly below grade level (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Redding & Henry, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Thus, turnaround principals must look for teachers who are intrinsically motivated and are committed to the school and district (Thomas et al., 2020). They also seek to find effective teachers who are willing to accept the challenge of closing instructional gaps and improving student achievement opportunities for all students.

Because the task of hiring effective teachers is both formidable and important, principals utilize different strategies when looking for the best candidates for their campus. Most of the BRISD principals involved their staff in the decision-making process by asking committees or teams what types of people they would like to have hired or what types of questions they would like to see used when screening candidates. Some, however, did not include their teachers in the decision-making process due to a variety of reasons. One BRISD principal was still trying to establish their campus culture and wanted to make sure every candidate interviewed would fit with the culture they were trying to create. Culture creation and development are key factors to consider when hiring and involving staff in the hiring process.

The participants in this study also focused on the types of candidates they look for when hiring for their campus. Several BRISD principals explained that they look specifically for grit, perseverance, and resilience. As one participant explained, “I can’t teach you grit. I can’t teach



you perseverance.” Other principals explained that they look for emotional intelligence, relationship-building qualities, and soft skills. Each participant felt they could teach their new teachers how to teach, lesson plan, and instructional practices. They wanted candidates who had strong interpersonal skills and the ability to develop relationships with their students and staff members so they could contribute and improve the culture of the campus.

Interviewing and hiring high-quality candidates is imperative to the success of the school. Onboarding and mentoring can launch the success of the teacher and the child, if done correctly. Onboarding meetings can introduce new teachers to campus, teacher, and student expectations before they are thrust into the classroom with students. Further, onboarding can set the tone for teachers and bring them into the fold of the campus’s culture. Finally, onboarding can provide opportunities for teachers to develop leadership capacity and hone their own skills as a teacher when given the opportunity to onboard staff members (Redding & Henry, 2019). The BRISD principals interviewed for this study did not believe their onboarding and mentoring practices were effective in launching the success of their staff and students. Some participants met regularly with their new teachers and had discussions about campus processes, like entering grades and lesson planning, and practices they could implement in their classroom. None of the principals who onboarded their staff made onboarding meetings a required practice. Not requiring attendance to onboarding meetings might have had an influence on their effectiveness. Only one of the principals interviewed expressed specific topics that were addressed in their onboarding meetings. After further reflection, however, some of the principals acknowledged that the things they should have introduced to their staff as critical centered more around various soft skills they believe were necessary for them to be able to teach and be successful teachers in the classroom. I found this to be interesting, as this was also what the principals explained they

look for when hiring. Thus, there appears to be a disconnect between hiring expectations and hiring practices. Strategic planning and preparation for the onboarding meetings based on the needs of the campus and the needs of the teachers attending onboarding meetings and participating in other mentoring events or programs could make onboarding practices more effective for principals and teachers. Further, identifying exactly which components of the campus culture are essential and necessary to address with new staff members could ensure the culture remains strong and teachers are brought into the fold.

Hiring, onboarding, and mentoring practices are so important because collegial relationships are a necessary factor in the culture and success of the campus. Collaborative relationships allow teachers to work together toward achieving the mission and vision of the campus. These types of relationships can make the work feel more manageable and allows colleagues to lean on each other for support (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). However, there are challenges that arise from trying to establish a culture of collaboration, as two principals that participated in this study noted. One challenge is that some teachers struggle to hold each other accountable. Because of the delicate nature of relationships and the feelings involved in working closely with someone, the emotional strain some teachers experience when holding others accountable can lead to frustration for staff members and principals as the expectations for success are high (Johnson et al., 2012). Another challenge is ensuring teachers and staff members collaborate. Though the education pendulum has swung away from teaching in silos, many teachers are comfortable planning independently and without collaboration. Still others are the only ones who teach a particular grade level or subject find themselves planning alone because they have no one else on their campus to plan with. This can create frustration, lack of trust, and bad habits in good

teachers who do not have an accountability partner or someone who will help them improve their craft. Thus, intentional structures for collaboration must be put in place by campus leaders if they expect collaboration (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Moore Johnson, 2015).

One of the structures that has become popular across the education sector and within schools and districts is the use of PLCs. Each of the BRISD principals interviewed for this study utilized PLCs. PLCs were established to increase teacher capacity, improve collegial relationships, and increase student achievement opportunities (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Copland, 2003; Hitt & Player, 2019; Moore Johnson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2020). However, successful PLCs do not just occur; they must be methodically and intentionally planned for. Time and resources must be set aside for PLCs to develop, trust to cultivate, and improvement in key instructional areas to occur (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Moore Johnson, 2015). The PLCs exhibited in several of the schools involved in this study utilized a data collection, data analysis, and an implementation cycle that occurred every two to three weeks, allowing teachers to implement the established plan, assess students, and analyze the results to continue to ensure high-quality instruction was implemented. Further, most of this study's participants adjusted their master schedule to allow for collaboration, whether it was during a designated and sacred time separate from their planning period or an established day and time for PLCs to occur.

Focused hiring practices and time for collaboration directly affect teacher capacity and efficacy. When high-quality teachers are afforded the time and space to improve their craft, collaborate with other educators, develop their understanding of the curriculum, and celebrate their successes, they improve as educators and build their instructional capacity. Further, they start to develop the belief in their ability as an educator (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Leaders can improve teacher capacity and efficacy in a variety of

ways, as evidenced by the participants' accounts in this study. First, principals are advised to celebrate their teachers at every opportunity, as it builds their confidence and improves their self-efficacy. By celebrating successes, principals are informing their staff that they are paying attention and are excited by their success. As one participant stated, "When people get a little taste of success, they don't like to let it go." Staff celebrations have the potential to make success contagious, encouraging everyone who has bought in to the mission and vision to seek that success. Next, campus leaders need to guide their teachers and staff to believe in the campus mission and vision so their instructional decisions will be sound and aligned with the school's mission and vision. Principals could also distribute the work of leading the campus, thus improving a teacher's instructional capacity and their own leadership capacity. As one BRISD principal explained, they encourage their teachers to lead collaboration-oriented meetings and team planning meetings, and the principal steps back to become a thinking partner in the meeting. Thus, collegial trust is an important factor in establishing teacher capacity and efficacy. When trust is established, teachers will confidently make instructional decisions that will benefit students, improving student achievement opportunities, and closing instructional gaps for students (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).

An unexpected theme that emerged was expectations of teachers. Several of the participants explained that they had high expectations for their teachers, whether it was behavioral expectations or instructional expectations. One principal stated, "Expectations change the culture." Thus, a principal's expectations influence and set the culture of the campus (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). The participants in this study communicated the norms and expectations for teachers to ensure relationships were developed, classroom expectations were set, and instructional expectations were high. From standing at the door each morning to greet

students to requiring teachers to take ownership of what happened in their classroom, grade level, or school, the BRISD principal participants in this study truly appeared to have a grasp on culture development and how that culture influenced student achievement opportunities and success.

While the educators in the building are an essential component of the culture and the success of the students in the building, parent and community support is as important, as that support has lasting repercussions beyond the walls of the campus. Further, the parents and community can influence the success of the students, campus, and principal, ensuring turnaround efforts are successful or stopping turnaround efforts completely (Copland, 2003; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019). Every BRISD principal expressed the importance of parents and community support, especially coming off the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its dramatic and life-altering effects on families and schools.

One of the most important factors in family and community support is developing trust (Day et al., 2016; Copland, 2003). If the parents trust that the principal is doing what is right for students, they will “do whatever they can for kids,” as one BRISD principal explained. Parents and families can partner with their students’ teachers and move student achievement forward; they also can halt all progress and make any and every decision difficult. Thus, principals need to capitalize on parent and family relationships and provide opportunities for trust to develop among between the staff and community. While the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all families from entering campuses due to district protocol, BRISD principals are now encouraged to allow parents in to have lunch with their students and attend family night events. Thus, BRISD principals are advised to make it a priority to invite parents and families in, to build and develop strong relationships. In doing so, they will more likely be able to ensure the campus culture is

reinforced and families support the decisions that are made (Copland, 2003).

Community support and partnerships were expressed by two BRISD turnaround principals. These principals shared they had strong church, business, and community partners who could supply students and families with things they need, including food, money for bills, and backpacks. Families with students attending these schools knew that if they needed something, they could ask the school and the school would help them, thus developing a trusting relationship. Additionally, the principals with strong community partners also explained that they showed appreciation for the teachers and staff at the school by providing lunches and appreciation gifts throughout the school year. These practices can help teachers feel valued and have the potential to encourage them to stay at a campus, as it promotes and supports a positive school culture (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Copland, 2003; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012).

The development of a strong campus culture is imperative to the success of the turnaround efforts made by a principal. Further, campus culture supports the second phase of Copland's (2003) theory of action for school turnaround and turnaround principals, as it enhances campus infrastructure and improves stakeholder buy-in. Turnaround principals need to be intentional when developing their campus culture, as the culture can support or terminate turnaround efforts. Additionally, turnaround principals are encouraged to identify teachers on staff who can support culture development and hire staff members who will continue to do the same. Finally, these leaders can plan events for families to come into the building to see their students and to see the progress they are making academically and identify community partners who can support their mission of building trusting relationships. Building these relationships will help create trust between families and the teachers and school, helping to develop and strengthen the development of school culture.

### Research Question 3

*What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?*

Sustainability efforts are paramount to the success of turnaround efforts put in place by turnaround principals. To make turnaround sustainable, the leader needs to disrupt the cycle causing the school to be unsuccessful. Leaders also need to search for ways to hire high-quality educators and retain them. Additionally, students and families are to be held to high expectations regarding attendance and behavior. Finally, turnaround schools should continue to receive the supports that have been implemented to ensure sustainability. If these efforts and practices are not implemented, the school may revert to a school in need of support and improvement, per ESSA (2015) and HB22 (2017) (Copland, 2003). Thus, turnaround principals and district leaders need to identify specific areas of success to perpetuate the growth and achievement that is occurring as well as implement supports that will sustain the progress that has been made. Unfortunately, this is the most challenging phase in turnaround theory when the leaders and campus culture change, altering the progress and opening the opportunity for failure (Copland, 2003; Pham et al., 2000).

Campus support was a theme that all participants identified as necessary for school turnaround to be sustainable. All participants noted the need for support in the areas of personnel, instructional coaches, students, and finances. They indicated that if they were given these supports, they could sustain the changes they had made and support the changes that still needed to be made on their campuses. In terms of personnel, principal participants identified different areas they felt could benefit their campuses. Three BRISD principals felt that additional administrative staff could help improve and sustain the progress they had made. The participants identified the need for extra administrators, school counselors, social workers, and school

psychologists to meet the social and emotional needs of their students and staff. They believed the additional personnel could improve working conditions and provide the necessary support students needed to ensure they are able to succeed, as suggested by Copland (2003). The principals who participated in this study also felt that they could ask for additional support, but their requests were not always fulfilled due to budgetary needs or lack of high-quality candidates, due to the national teacher shortage.

BRISD principals also expressed the desire to have more instructional support on their campuses. Because of the nature of the instructional coaching and budgetary structure established in BRISD, there were not enough instructional coaches for all subjects and all campuses. These coaches were paid through Title I funds and were hired and assigned at the district level. The participants in this study felt that consistently having coaches on their campuses, who knew the teachers and the instructional needs of the campus, could greatly influence instruction and drive student achievement. Additionally, adding an instructional coach to every campus could be more cost-effective than hiring more teachers or raising the annual pay of teachers at turnaround schools. Further, this decision could provide longer-lasting effects for teacher capacity, instructional capacity, and teacher retention. These ideas are also suggested by Boyce and Bowers (2017) and Grissom and Loeb (2011).

Another campus level support that was identified by the participants was the need for student and financial support. The principals felt that smaller class sizes and small group instruction were essential to turnaround efforts, as teachers could get to know their students better, both personally and instructionally, and provide the necessary supports to improve achievement opportunities. Further, existing literature revealed a relationship between smaller class sizes and more intimate knowledge of students. These findings support the idea that smaller



class sizes and knowledge of their students can increase teacher efficacy and improve teaching practices, as teachers are able to narrow their focus and provide intensive support in needed areas (Goddard et al., 2017; Hallinger et al., 2020; Hitt & Player, 2019; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Implementation of these practices would require more money to be allocated to turnaround campuses, a requirement that is challenging and often not done. Smaller class sizes could result in more teachers; however, locating qualified teachers is increasingly becoming more difficult due to the teacher shortage that is affecting the nation. Another area of financial support was identified by several principals who felt that teachers employed at turnaround campuses should be paid more for their efforts and expanse of knowledge. One principal expressed that teachers who are employed at turnaround schools should have a proven record of closing gaps and improving instructional opportunities for students because of the importance of teacher quality in improving student achievement, as noted by Hattie (2008).

Campus-level supports were easily identified, as turnaround principals felt strongly about the personnel and financial support they needed to sustain turnaround efforts. Turnaround principals identified teacher and parent support as well as student behavior support as important to the implementation and sustainability of their turnaround efforts. While some turnaround principals focused mostly on data and progress, most of the BRISD principals interviewed for this study honed in on the soft skills teachers needed to ensure student success, like classroom and behavior support. Frequent feedback and appreciation were common among the participants as they reflected how their teachers felt most supported by them. This aligns closely with the literature, as researchers have identified the importance of guiding and nurturing teachers to become instructional leaders in the classroom (Shaked, 2020). Participants also sought to include teachers in the decision-making process, especially when the decisions directly affected them. By

encouraging teachers to become instructional leaders and supporting them in the needed instructional and behavior areas, turnaround principals ensured the campus culture was strengthened and high expectations for students and staff were established (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2002; Shaked, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

Student behavior arose as an important component of turnaround sustainability, as student behavior can pull teachers and administrators away from the shared mission and vision of increasing student achievement opportunities and improving the campus letter grade. Some of the participants shared that there were days that the administrative team was unable to get into classrooms to support teachers because they were consumed by the students' behavior incidents. Constant behavior intervention can detract from the school's mission and campus goals. Further, it can affect a principal's conception of their ability to lead as a turnaround principal (Bandura, 1993). One way principals could support teachers in interrupting student misbehavior is to provide teachers with support through the onboarding and mentoring process. By teaching teachers what to do when a student misbehaves and giving them the tools necessary to handle in-class disruptions, many of the out-of-control behaviors seen at struggling campuses could be eliminated. Additionally, behavior support staff could coach teachers when they are struggling and provide breaks and interventions for students who need it. One important component that is often disregarded is the effectiveness of the interventionist and coach; if they are not effective at changing behaviors, they will not be successful in supporting teachers and students, and administrative staff will have to intervene. Thus, getting the right people in the right positions is imperative, especially at turnaround campuses (Hitt & Player, 2019).

Parent support emerged as the final theme for this research question. All the principal

participants indicated that they felt their parents supported their mission and vision and were integral components of the work. Because most turnaround schools are predominantly filled with students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, some of the parents may not be able to successfully navigate the school setting and struggle to help their students with their schoolwork. By recognizing the areas of strength that parents have as well as the deficit areas, turnaround leaders can lean on parents' strengths and build up their areas of growth to ensure student success in and out of school. Improving parent capacity in the school setting has been found to directly impact a principal's conceived controllability of their environment (Bandura, 1993) and positively affect a student's long-term achievement opportunities. Parent capacity development requires relationships and trust, which was addressed earlier in this chapter. Without a meaningful connection, parents might not feel the need to support the work done during the school day and can negatively impact progress toward the shared mission and vision.

If turnaround efforts are to be successful, turnaround leaders must have a strong belief in their ability to make dramatic and rapid change and must have the support necessary to implement best practices and follow through with the proposed changes (Bandura, 1993; Copland, 2003; Hitt & Player, 2019; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019). In this exploratory phenomenological study, I sought to examine the qualities, traits, and practices implemented by turnaround leaders in one school district. An analysis of the qualitative data yielded several themes, which were organized by research question. Thirteen themes emerged from both deductive and inductive means: principal self-efficacy, shared mission and vision, hiring practices, collegial relationships, parent and community support, teacher capacity and efficacy, PLCs, expectations of teachers, mentoring and onboarding, campus-level support, parent support, student behavior, and teacher motivation and support.

Table 3

*Identified Themes and Related Research Questions*

Research Questions	Deductive Themes	Inductive Themes
What are principals' perceptions about their own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving opportunities for student achievement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal Self-Efficacy</li> <li>• Shared Mission and Vision</li> </ul>	
To what extent are the leadership practices principals report using at failing or struggling campuses aligned with turnaround principal characteristics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring Practices</li> <li>• Collegial Relationships</li> <li>• Parents and Community Support</li> <li>• Teacher Capacity and Efficacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)</li> <li>• Expectations of Teachers</li> <li>• Mentoring and Onboarding</li> </ul>
What are the perceptions of principals about what supports need to be in place to sustain the improvements made by the principals at the campus?	Campus-Level Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent Support</li> <li>• Student Behavior</li> <li>• Teacher Motivation and Support</li> </ul>

The themes that emerged from this study can be used to inform turnaround principals and district leaders of the steps that turnaround leaders have used to make dramatic and rapid change in one school district. By analyzing the themes independently and collectively, instructional leaders can identify areas of focus within their school and school district as starting points for making change. Further, these themes are not solely for campus administrators in the throes of campus turnaround; these practices and behaviors can be implemented by any leader who is looking to improve their campus culture, instruction, and practices.

Turnaround efforts are not one size fits all. Because of the different students, teachers, leaders, and communities involved in campuses across the nation, various approaches need to be considered. However, the themes that emerged from this study as well as the literature used to support the work serve as starting points for turnaround leaders and district leaders who are attempting to improve a school's achievement opportunities. Because of the nature of the school system in the United States of America, schools are expected to be held accountable to their

students, families, and community members. Further, because of the systemic issues that plague our society, it is likely that there will always be a need for turnaround schools. Utilizing the information gathered for this study and the results of this study, campus and district leaders can identify areas of improvement to lead turnaround efforts.

### Implications for Practice

The findings from this study can be used as a starting point for schools in need of immediate and wholesale change. The review of the research literature established that education reform efforts have volleyed school responsibility between federal and state governments. While education is primarily a function of the states, federal efforts like No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) provide rewards and sanctions for success and struggles (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). While the intention behind these efforts is well-intended, the result is often detrimental to those students who attend struggling campuses. Schools in compliance with federal and state education policy often serve large populations of White, middle- and upper-class students, while those out of compliance often serve minority-rich populations and lower-economic students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

Texas's House Bill 22 ([HB22], 2017) implemented an A-F accountability system that provided a letter grade to every school and school district in the state. Schools with a rating of a grade of A, B, or C are in compliance with HB22 (2017), while those with a grade of D or F are out of compliance, which directly and indirectly affect the students, families, and communities of that school (Hamilton et al., 2014; Pazey et al., 2015). The pressure that school leaders face to make drastic improvements to their campus by hiring and retaining high-quality teachers, increase efficacy across the campus, and improve student achievement performance can be overwhelming. Further, the dwindling teacher workforce can add to the pressures that school

leaders face, especially if there are internal and external barriers that appear too difficult to overcome. With campus, district, and community supports in place, however, turnaround leaders can make the drastic changes needed to increase student achievement and improve their performance rating.

District leaders who are tasked with turnaround responsibilities need to identify school leaders who exhibit the resilience and perseverance necessary to carry out this work. They need to also find leaders who are change agents and are able to disrupt the ineffectiveness that has led to the need for turnaround efforts. The campus leaders tasked with turning around a school must be able to implement a shared mission and vision, hire effective teachers, and create structures for intentional and collegial relationships to develop. Further, they must have structures in place to develop teacher capacity. One way to do this is to leverage veteran teachers across the campus and district to mentor and onboard new teachers. Additionally, collegial structures like PLCs can help campus leaders develop teacher capacity, but the work must be focused and intentional. The final and most difficult step of turnaround efforts is to sustain the efforts that have been implemented, as research shows that turnaround efforts often fail after three years of implementation (Copland, 2003; Pham et al., 2020; Redding & Henry, 2019). This can no longer be acceptable as the futures of students and our communities is at risk. District leaders who seek to install a turnaround leader at a campus must consider the long-term effects of principal placement. Ensuring campus leaders have the traits and qualities necessary to turn a school around while also ensuring they can implement a long-term culture of high expectations of student learning is imperative to long-term school and student success. The district must transform to encourage and allow school turnaround; school leaders cannot turn the school around alone (Schlechty, 1990). They must have the supports from the district if they are going

to truly make campus-level changes that improve student achievement opportunities for the students in their schools.

### Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, behaviors and practices that are currently implemented in an average-sized school district in Texas were identified. Nevertheless, there are areas that could be explored further and differently to further contribute to the research literature.

First, the participants chosen for this study were from one average-sized school district in Texas. Therefore, their reported experiences, practices, and behaviors are not necessarily generalizable to larger or smaller school districts in Texas, or other schools outside of Texas. Expanding the participant pool to include other school districts of various sizes and populations could add more to the existing literature and generalize the findings.

Second, I only studied turnaround leaders. A comparative case study examining the different practices, behaviors, and cultures between high-performing and low-performing schools could provide more in-depth understanding of turnaround practices and characteristics district leaders should look for when looking for campus leadership. Additionally, some school districts identify their turnaround schools explicitly and treat them as turnaround schools, providing them with the resources they feel are necessary to success. The school district I chose to study does not explicitly identify their turnaround schools. It could further the literature by comparing schools that are labeled as turnaround campuses and those that are not labeled but need support, per TEA's accountability system.

Finally, a comparative case study of turnaround schools that serve different student populations could inform the literature and deepen researcher and leader understanding of turnaround practices with different demographics. Perhaps the same turnaround practices can be

implemented regardless of student population, but further research in this area would need to be completed to make that assessment.

### Summary

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to explore which turnaround leadership behaviors and practices are exhibited at struggling campuses and which behaviors have the potential to provide long-term, equitable educational opportunities for all students. Data were collected through six semi-structured interviews with campus principals serving at schools in need of targeted support, per TEA's classification and accountability system. A combination of inductive and deductive coding strategies was employed, and the themes that emerged were analyzed using the lens of existing literature. The themes were aligned with the research questions that sought to explore principals' perceptions about their ability to lead as a turnaround principal, the practices and behaviors that are employed at turnaround schools, and the perceptions of principals about the sustainability of the improvements they have made. The findings of this study can be used to better inform campus and district leaders about the qualities and characteristics of turnaround leaders, as well as the supports necessary for turnaround efforts and the sustainability of those efforts.

### Researcher Reflection

I have always felt drawn to the John Lewis quote saying, "Speak up, speak out, get in the way. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America." This study is my way of getting into good and necessary trouble. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have my parents buy a cheap house in a good school district. If they had not found the house with a completely broken foundation, who knows where I would have gone to school. Instead, they bought what they could afford, and I was able to attend schools with educators who cared about



the success of their students, pushed their students to succeed, and were committed to staying in the district. The long-term effects of that decision put me on the path of success. Unfortunately, there are children in the United States today who do not have the luxury of earning a high-quality education, simply because of where they live and their socioeconomic status.

When I became a classroom teacher, the A through F accountability movement was gaining traction in Texas. I lucked out by getting a job at an A-grade rated school serving students living in houses worth \$500,000 or more and going on international vacations whenever the feeling struck their parents. I, like the students I served, did nothing to deserve attending that school. They were born into a life of luxury, and I lucked into a job. I found that my students would be okay, even if I did not provide a high-quality lesson that day. The work was challenging, but doable, as the students were expected to achieve and did with ease. I loved working at that school but found myself drawn to the struggles of the schools less than five miles away, who served students living in apartments and living with other families who struggled due to the detrimental effects of a D or F rating from TEA's accountability system and had never been on a vacation.

I was granted an opportunity to become an administrator at a failing campus. I knew the work would be incredibly difficult, but I also knew it would be worthwhile. I also was in a doctoral class that made us begin to think deeply about our dissertation topic. This spark of opportunity ignited the fire of this study. I wanted to know what it would take to improve the achievement opportunities of the students who attended my school and I wanted to learn from the administrators who were already doing the challenging work of turning around a campus. Our children deserve the opportunity to earn a high-quality education and learn from strong teachers who have bought into the belief that every child should learn with high expectations,

regardless of where they live or what schools they attend. They deserve the opportunity to dream big and be placed on a path to reach their dreams. They deserve the chance to have a teacher that sets them up for success and provides them every opportunity to succeed. I feel that this has become my life's mission.

My primary goal for this work is to disrupt the current education system. My hope for this study is that other educators observe the necessary traits and characteristics of turnaround leaders to ensure that every child in America, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can succeed. The long-term effects of every student having every opportunity to succeed could dramatically alter our future in a positive way. By engaging students in an education system where they have the education and opportunity to explore their interests, dreams, and passions, we are guaranteeing ourselves a better future. But the public education system must change. We can no longer allow for those who have many resources to take priority over those who have not. This study could continue the work that turnaround researchers started decades ago.

Completing this study is the first step in my work in advocating for all students in the public education system. I plan to continue to expand this area of the research and seek to implement long-term sustainable change in the education system. I would like to teach in a higher education setting to inform current and future instructional leaders of the qualities and characteristics all leaders should exhibit, especially those serving large populations of low-socioeconomic backgrounds. I also plan on collaborating with turnaround leaders and district leaders to create a path for immediate and wholesale change, while also implementing practices that will be sustainable over time. The effects of this work might not be immediate, but the impact could be long-lasting and dramatically alter the path of students, families, and communities.

## Conclusion

Federal and state policies regarding public education have been debated, reformed, and implemented for decades to ensure the success of the public education system. At the time of this study, Texas implemented an A through F accountability system to provide a quick understanding of the effectiveness of a school (House Bill 22, 2017). Unfortunately, there are several factors to consider when assessing school effectiveness, none of which are made clear with one letter grade. The need for turnaround leadership arises when schools and school districts are expected to make rapid and significant improvements to increase test scores and improve campus and district letter grades (Reitzug & Kappler Hewitt, 2017). In this study, I sought to answer the question: What does it take to turn around a school that is judged to be ineffective and make it better for students attending that school? The efforts of the turnaround leaders highlighted in this study as well as those around the country may give us the insight necessary to make dramatic change and to ensure turnaround efforts are sustainable. Their efforts could, in fact, change our future.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY:** Strategies Effective Turnaround Principals Use to Improve School Performance Ratings Under the Texas A-F Accountability System

**RESEARCH TEAM:**

Dr. Barbara Pazez, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, [REDACTED];  
[REDACTED]; Jessica Knox, Doctoral Candidate, [REDACTED],  
[REDACTED].

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. The investigators will explain the study to you and will answer any questions you might have. It is your choice whether or not you take part in this study. If you agree to participate and then choose to withdraw from the study, that is your right, and your decision will not be held against you.

You are being asked to take part in a research study about turnaround leadership behaviors and practices that are exhibited at schools that are classified as in need of targeted support. Further, we are investigating which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable, long-term educational opportunities for all students.

Your participation in this research study involves an hour-long interview to determine which practices and behaviors you report using at your campus and your perception of the effectiveness of the practices in providing equitable educational opportunities for all students. More details will be provided in the next section.

You will be asked six open-ended questions that will explore your experience as an administrator, your belief in your abilities as a leader, and the practices and behaviors you currently implement on your campus.

You might want to participate in this study if you believe all children have a right to an equitable education and wish to share your views and perceptions of practices and behaviors that may impact a student's education. However, you might not want to participate in this study if you do not have time to be interviewed for the study.

You may choose to participate in this research study if you are a leader at a campus identified as in need of targeted support and believe you have implemented practices and exhibited behaviors that could provide equitable educational opportunities for all students.

The reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts to you if you choose to take part is that you will share your honest opinion about your perceptions of your own behaviors and practices as a leader at a school identified as in need of improvement. As an investigator, I will maintain confidentiality and will report the findings in my dissertation under a pseudonym to protect your privacy. You can compare this to the possible benefit of determining which behaviors and practices can impact student achievement opportunities and provide equitable opportunities for all students. You will not receive compensation for participation.

**DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:** The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** The purpose of this study is to explore turnaround leadership behaviors that are in use at schools identified as in need of targeted support and which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable long-term educational opportunities for all students.

**TIME COMMITMENT:** While data collection for this study will span approximately two months, your participation in this study is expected to last approximately one hour.

**STUDY PROCEDURES:**

Participants are chosen based on their assignment to a school in need of targeted support. A recruitment email will be sent to the pre-selected participants to solicit interest. Interviews will be scheduled at a day and time that is convenient for the participant and will be given the option to participate in face-to-face interviews at their campuses or virtually. Informed consent will be provided to participants who agree to participate in the study and all questions will be answered prior to the interview. Further, participants will be encouraged to sign the informed consent prior to their scheduled interview, which can be collected in person or sent via email.

At the time of the interview, I will introduce myself and will review informed consent to ensure the participant understands the procedures, to answer any questions they may have, and to remind them that they can refuse participation at any point, should they feel uncomfortable. With permission, all interviews will be recorded using my cell phone and an external recording device to ensure accurate data collection. If the participant does not grant permission for audio recording, they may still participate in the interview, and I will type notes through the interview. The interviews will consistently follow a protocol and should take approximately 60 minutes.

All participants will be given the option to skip a question if they feel uncomfortable answering it.

Once the interview is complete, the audio recording will be uploaded to Rev.com to provide a transcription of the interview. I will compare the recordings to the transcript for accuracy. Finally, participants will be provided the transcript to ensure accuracy of the information collected.

**AUDIO/VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHY:**

- I agree** to be audio recorded during the research study.
- I agree** that the audio recording can be used in publications or presentations.
- I do not agree** that the audio recording can be used in publications or presentations.
- I do not agree** to be audio recorded during the research study.

You may participate if you do not agree to be audio recorded for this study.

All recordings will be kept with other electronic data on a password-protected computer in a locked room throughout the duration of the study.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS:** Your participation in this study could impact the leadership behaviors implemented at schools in need of turnaround leadership. The practices and behaviors you report using may have a significant and lasting effect on student achievement opportunities and have the potential to be replicated at other campuses.

**POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:** This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you do experience any discomfort, please inform the research team.

Remember that you have the right to withdraw any study procedures at any time without penalty and may do so by informing the research team.

Participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured by the research team. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

Participating in this research study may involve increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to in-person interactions with the research team. The study team will follow local regulations and institutional policies, including using personal protective equipment (masks) and social distancing guidelines while those regulations and policies are in effect. If you have any questions or concerns, please discuss them with your research team.

If you experience excessive discomfort when completing the research activity, you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty. The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen, but the study may involve risks to the participant, which are currently unforeseeable. UNT does not provide medical services, or financial assistance for emotional distress or injuries that might happen from participating in this research. If you need to discuss your discomfort further, please contact a mental health provider, or you may contact the researcher who will refer you to appropriate services. If your need is urgent, helpful resources include Denton County MHMR crisis hotline at 1-800-762-0157 or Dallas County MHMR crisis hotline at 800-866-8000.

**COMPENSATION:** No compensation will be offered for participating in this study.

**ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES:** There are no alternative activities offered for this study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Efforts will be made by the research team to keep your personal information private, including research study responses, and disclosure will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on a password protected computer in a locked room, located at the student researcher's house for at least three (3) years past the end of this

research. Research records will be labeled with a pseudonym and the master key linking names with codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained.

While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records, as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

This research uses a third party software called Rev.com© and is subject to the privacy policies of this software noted here: <https://www.rev.com/about/privacy>.

**CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:** If you have any questions about the study you may contact Jessica Knox at [REDACTED] / [REDACTED] or Dr. Barbara Pazez at [REDACTED] / [REDACTED]. Any questions you have regarding your rights as a research subject, or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 940-565-4643, or by email at [untirb@unt.edu](mailto:untirb@unt.edu).

**CONSENT:**

- Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above.
- You confirm that you have been told the possible benefits, risks, and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits.
- You understand your rights as a research participant, and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study; you also understand that the study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- By signing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

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**SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT**

**DATE**

**\*If you agree to participate, please provide a signed copy of this form to the researcher team. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.**



APPENDIX B  
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. My name is Jessica Knox, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Texas. Prior to agreeing to participate in this study, you were provided a copy of the UNT Institutional Review Board's informed consent form. You were asked to review and sign this form prior to our time together today. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to end your participation at any time during the study. Are there any questions related to the informed consent form or your participation in this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore which turnaround leadership behaviors are exhibited in failing schools or campuses in need of targeted support as identified by TEA and which behaviors have the potential to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students. Further, this study is designed to examine how school leaders at schools identified as in need of targeted support are applying various leadership styles, influencing school culture, and impacting efficacy. The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding of the leadership practices you employ on your campus.

Our interview will be recorded using my phone, as well as an external recording device to ensure the interview is documented. The recording will be transcribed using Rev.com©, which is an online transcription service. I may also take some handwritten notes throughout our interview. Once the transcription is complete, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for you to confirm that it accurately captures the content you have shared with me today. The recording, transcript, and my handwritten notes will be kept secure according to UNT policies. A pseudonym for each participant, school, and district will be used to protect the confidentiality of each person and entity participating in this study. Do you have any objections to the use of an audio recorder for today's interview?

Thank you again for taking time to participate in my study. I look forward to hearing about your unique perspective related to the purpose of this study and my work on my dissertation. Do you have any questions before we proceed?

1. Please describe your administrative career through your current position.
2. Prior to your current position, what leadership strategies do you believe are most effective in improving student performance?
3. Please talk about your belief in your own ability to lead as a turnaround principal towards improving student performance at your campus.
4. Tell me about the types of practices and behaviors you use at your campus as a turnaround principal.
5. What types of supports do you believe need to be in place to sustain the improvements that you've already made?
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences as a turnaround principal?

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