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The purpose of this study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they stay. My study addressed the experiences of those individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools, including their needs and stressors, or describing their external supports they perceive causing them to stay. The qualitative study borrowed elements of a narrative study through the interview process. Nine current or former administrators, in two Piedmont North Carolina school districts, were selected for interviews, lasting approximately 90 minutes to two hours in length. All interviews were conducted at the convenience of the school employee in relation to time and location. The participants represented a cross section of experience, levels of schooling, gender and ethnicity.

The significance of their experiences as it relates to principal retention and turnover were examined. The major stressors identified were raising achievement scores and lack of support from supervisors. The supports of having effective mentors and instructional coaches, being able to distribute leadership and having valuable college coursework were common among participants. Other major themes included the importance of finding balance in the principalship, the impact of health issues, the rewards of being a school leader and advice they would give to new administrators. Current and future principals, policy makers and school districts can benefit from the data gathered as it relates to the needed skill sets, supports and stressors to promote less turnover in the principalship.

WHY PRINCIPALS LEAVE? WHY PRINCIPALS STAY?

by

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I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Ron Burress,
whose love, support and devotion encouraged me during the
days, weeks and months of research and writing.
You always believed in me and I am grateful.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Karen Conner Burress, has been approved by the

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The principalship is a job that carries many responsibilities for dealing with a variety of constituencies—students, faculty, staff, families, and the community. All of these groups have needs and expectations that find their way to the principal's door. Being an effective administrator opens one to a level of scrutiny where decisions are not only observed, but they are also analyzed by stakeholders.

Nowadays, a school principal is asked to be a curriculum manager, staff motivator, business manager, evaluator, public relations representative, safety expert, disciplinarian, and site manager (Whaley, 2002). Villani (2008) writes, "Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that there are stories depicting the principal as superhuman. It would seem to take someone with extraordinary abilities to do such a job successfully" (p. 5). Another writer, Robert Ricken (2007) agrees, "The qualities used to describe an excellent leader are akin to those of a near-perfect human being" (p. 1) As quoted in Villiani's (2008) text, Ron Ferguson wrote a poem about the move from teacher to principal and the stanzas below note the high expectations and resulting stress that accompany the principalship.

I was once a classroom teacher.
Now I try to run a school.
When I first got the promotion
I thought I was really cool
I knew it would be a challenge,

But I thought I was prepared,
So I stepped into the job
And started pulling out my hair!!! (p. 1)

The responsibilities of the school principal continue to grow over time. Societal expectations for schools to resolve issues such as ethnic diversity, social cohesion and inclusion also place principals in the spotlight for taking on massive social reforms (Stevenson, 2006). We know that principal positions carry a variety of responsibilities and expectations seem to be increasing, causing pressure and stress to these individuals. When principals experience too much stress, they sometimes leave their school. This can occur voluntarily or principals may be coerced to take on another role.

As a school administrator for the past sixteen years, I have witnessed the turnover of principals in my own and neighboring districts. Principals in North Carolina work on a contract status, usually for a 2-year or a 4-year term, but I am interested in why a number of my colleagues do not remain at their schools for their full contract term. Were the pressures and high expectations of the job impacting their ability to carry out their responsibilities in a capable manner? Is it possible that some principals were placed in schools that were not a good match for their skill set? If so, did these principals receive adequate support in their role from district leaders? What factors contribute to some principals voluntarily leaving their schools and principalship?

What We Know from the Research

Dealing with a myriad of responsibilities and stresses can contribute to principal turnover. As a growing number of principals resign and/or retire, fewer qualified people are applying to fill these vacancies (Fenwick, 2000). In 2011, the National Bureau of

Economic Research released a study stating that one out of every five principals leaves

his or her school each year (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011). They found in some

instances career changes were influenced by district leadership, while in others principals

initiated the move. A 1998 survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary

School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals found

that increased responsibilities, long work days, difficult parents, low salaries and pressure

from local and state mandates, made the principalship less desirable than it had once been

(Potter, 2001). Principals have a direct impact on creating and sustaining school-wide

conditions that support student learning; therefore, principal turnover can negatively

impact student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Hall, Berg, and Barnett (2003) captured the complexity of the principalship by

concluding:

> If there is one overall conclusion we would offer based on the past two decades of
> study of beginning principals in America, it would be that the job has become
> increasingly complex, more difficult, and with intense and unreasonable pressures
> to solve a broad menu of education, social, and personal problems. At this time,
> the demands for accountability, maintaining a safe environment and serving all
> the needs of children (and many needs of their parents) means that in reality no
> one person can do it all . . . We also are very concerned about how long they can
> survive in the pressure cooker that the principalship has become. (pp. 2–3)

In early 2012 a large, local school district gathered data on retention rates of their

current principals, detailing how long school leaders had been in the district and how

long they were at each school. Between 2006 and 2008, the problem of principal turnover

was especially acute when 61% of principals were at their current schools for one year or

less (Glover, 2012). In recent years, the situation in the district had improved with only

43% of principals in their school fewer than two years (Glover, 2012). However, board members acted to increase the stability of school leaders, since they establish strong community ties, build staff morale and many are able to lead schools to measurable improvements. They discussed an incentive plan that would give principals remaining in schools for numerous years a bonus, regardless of the school's achievement. This is an example of how one local board of education valued the commitment principals give to schools.

Having effective principals in place to lead schools is imperative to student success. Being able to select and retain quality principals is critical to improving and sustaining success in schools (Fuller, Orr, & Young, 2008). Often, good principals are arbitrarily promoted to central office positions, hurting schools and creating vacancies that are difficult to fill (Potter, 2001). Districts would benefit from keeping good principals in schools for a longer period of time. Leaders can learn from mistakes, and good leaders do not see their mistakes as failures. "They not only believe in the necessity of mistakes, they see them as virtually synonymous with growth and progress" (Bennis, 2009, p. 89). Allowing mistakes can encourage a culture of creativity and risk-taking for not only the leader but the employees as well. Thus, allowing the leader of the school, the principal, to remain at the school longer, allows him to grow and learn from the miscues in leading the staff and leading better student achievement.

Significance of the Study

Since we know school principals are crucial to leading schools and raising student achievement, retaining school leaders is vital. High-quality principals can lead to better

prepared teachers working toward better learning outcomes (Baker & Cooper, 2005). However, we have little information about why principals leave their schools and/or districts. "While research has for years highlighted the large numbers of beginning teachers who leave the classroom in three or four years, no national study has documented the career moves that principals make, according to experts" (Viadero, 2009, p. 1). Yet, some university scholars have written about the pressures and issues surrounding the principalship. Having personally witnessed a number of colleagues leave their principal positions, I want to delve more deeply into the reasons behind these principal initiated moves. University training programs and district leaders would benefit from understanding the factors that influence a principal's decision to leave his or her school so further supports could be in place to assist those principals in remaining at their assigned schools. Aspiring and current principals would benefit by knowing if career responsibilities lead to stressors causing principals to derail. It is expected that results from this study will benefit principals who desire to remain in the principalship long-term.

Purpose of the Study/Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they remain. My study seeks to address the experiences of those individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools including their needs and stressors as well as describing their external supports they perceive causing them to stay.

My research questions include:

- What factors influence principals to leave (or stay in) their assigned schools?

- What are the perceived stressors of school principals and do they impact their remaining at, or departing from, their schools?

- What are the supports school principals receive and do they impact them to remain in their schools?

- What are the supports principals perceive that they need but do not receive, and does not receiving them impact them to leave their schools?

In order to determine the answers to the research questions, Chapter II will include a review of the related literature surrounding the topic of principals as leaders and factors that might influence their staying or leaving. Then, in Chapter III, the methodology of the qualitative research will be explained as well as how the study was conducted. Chapter IV will reveal the profiles of the participants and will identify other emerging themes that arose from the data. In Chapter V the research questions will be revisited and the findings explained. Chapter VI will state the implications, conclusions and recommendations of the study that arose from the data gathered from current and former principals.

In reviewing the literature in Chapter II, I begin by briefly examining the history of school leadership and some changes that have occurred in recent years that may impact the principalship. From there, I discuss the significance of the role of the principal and how impactful the leader is when it comes to influencing teachers and student success. Next, the nature of the work of the principal is reviewed, specifically the components of

instructional leadership. How principals motivate teachers, and develop them to promote excellence in teaching, is crucial to successful instructional leadership. It is important for leaders to distribute responsibilities within the building while increasing stakeholder buy-in.

Job-related stressors were investigated since the school leadership role continues to change. The complexities of the job become relevant from the review of the literature, as research revealed an increasing workload which resulted in burnout for some and health issues for others. The National Association of Secondary School Administrators (NASSP) conducted a study showing an increase in working hours of principals. In the work of Brock and Grady (2002), as well as Marshall and Casten (1994), triggers of stress are identified and how principals can successfully deal with the overload to remain successful. Then, the perception of principal shortages is discussed in studies by the Southern Regional Education Board (2007) and by Winter, Rinehart, and Munoz (2004). The rate of turnover among school leaders is shown in studies by the Illinois Public Schools and the RAND Corporation (as cited in DeAngelis & White, 2011). How turnover affects the staff and students in urban schools is shown to be more significant than suburban areas as reported in the work of Fuller et al. (2008). Stress levels and turnover rates are increasing for all principals, according to the research. Thus, the importance of retaining principals and decreasing turnover rates in schools is apparent.

In Chapter III, the methodology of the study is described, including a description of the narrative research tradition, data collection, data analysis, and the identification of the key concepts and terms. Nine participants, current or former principals, were

identified for interviews in the study. They were paired into two categories of experiences, four years or less and five years of more. Within these two groups, there were principals who left the principalship, those who stayed in the principalship but worked in different schools and a few who had only been in one school for their career. Participants were allowed to choose a time and place for the interview session that was convenient for them and their request was followed. In general, interviews lasted from one and a half to two hours per interviewee. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for themes related to the research questions. The data was categorized around the research questions.

Previous interactions with administrators and other district staff within each organization can create impressions that principals may have stayed or left for particular reasons. However, in order to refrain from bias and better control for subjectivity, I had to rely on the interview protocol and predetermined questions to be the focus of the interview and not allow unrelated topics to sway the data collection. I strived to collect analyze, and interpret the data outside of my opinions, values, and previous knowledge of each educator. Ensuring that the interviews dug below surface concepts to far greater depth, assisted with the trustworthiness of the data. Member checking was utilized to allow the current and former principals to review the data collection. Also, they were encouraged to provide additional thoughts related to the study.

One of the greatest benefits for participants in this study was the opportunity for current and former principals to share their stories regarding the principalship at their respective schools. Participants were able to reflect upon their experiences, some positive

while others were negative, and this could help them to identify best practices to improve leadership. There were some risks involved with the study, but the IRB guidelines were followed, to protect confidentiality, including the use of pseudonyms for participants and their schools. There were limitations to the study and since it was a small cross section of participants interviewed, the data collected were not necessarily transferable to all school leaders in our state or nation, although the common themes identified in stressors and supports were prevalent according to the research cited in the review of the literature.

Chapter IV allows the reader to meet the participants in the study by telling parts of their story, including why that school leader left or stayed in the principalship. The profiles of nine current or former principals are examined. They identified stressors and supports received, as well as supports they desired, but did not receive. As much as was possible, the voices of the principals are included in this section. From the many quotes in this section, the reader can begin to understand the emotion and passion these leaders possess. The honesty of the challenges of the principal role are easily identified. Ironically, there were some principals who identified a stressor, which for another colleague may have been a support. This was most likely due to the differences in their schools and their support systems.

The latter part of Chapter IV contains other emerging themes that were identified, but that were not directly related to the research questions. These themes included the importance of balance in the principalship, the impact of health issues on principals, the rewards of being a school leader and the advice they would give to other principals. Striving to raise student achievement in the principalship was a universal theme among

the nine principals interviewed. Likewise, all nine interviewees shared at least one health-related issue they believed could be a direct result of the stress endured from the role of school leader. Leaders were comfortable enough in the interview setting to discuss the challenges and stressors in the position and all of them also shared some of the rewards that come with being the school principal. The last emerging theme identified was that of the advice they would give to new principals or advice they wish they had received. The over-arching ideas included what time of year to begin your first principalship, the importance of establishing relationships with others, the importance of hiring your own assistant principals or support team and distributing leadership to involve stakeholders while balancing duties and refraining from isolation.

In Chapter V, I revisit the research questions and summarize the input from the participants. I included quotes from many of the participants so that their stories could be heard. The data revealed reasons for leaving or staying in the principalship. Next, the results of the data from four participants whom had led two or more schools during their careers was shared. While some changes were thoughtfully and purposely pursued, other school leaders were directed to move schools on multiple occasions by district leadership, usually the superintendent. Last, three of nine interviewees were principals that had remained at only one school. However, for two of the three participants, this was most likely due to them being in the early part of their first principalship. Both shared about the next position they were considering for their future. One of the nine principals had only been in one school long-term and this appeared to be rare, according to the data collected and from the review of the literature.

The implications, conclusions and recommendations are discussed in Chapter VI. As researcher, I reflect on the study and state possible implications in the recommendations for aspiring and current principals, recommendations for school districts and policymakers. Considering future research, teacher retention has been a focus of a myriad of studies, but principal retention studies and research are quite rare. Since principals are influential in their schools, more research is warranted. The results could be used to assist districts and legislatures in putting practices and policies in place to increase principal satisfaction and tenure.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A job description that appeared in an article by Michael Copland (as cited in Hayes, 2004) lists a myriad of qualities and skills that would make someone effective in the school principalship.

> Position Opening: School Principal, Anytown School District. Qualifications: Wisdom of a sage, vision of a CEO, intellect of a scholar, leadership of a point guard, compassion of a counselor, moral strength of a nun, courage of a firefighter, craft knowledge of a surgeon, political savvy of a senator, toughness of a soldier, listening skills of a blind man, humility of a saint, collaborative skills of an entrepreneur, servitude of a civil rights activist, charisma of a state performer, and patience of Job. Salary lower than you might expect. Credential required. For application materials, contact . . . (Hayes, 2004, p. vii)

This description depicts a variety of skills and characteristics that a principal should possess. How important are principals to the success of schools? In other words, how much do students and teachers need strong leadership to achieve the standards and growth expected?

The idea that leadership and learning are related continues to be an area of study for educators and researchers. Kenneth Leithwood and Karen Seashore Louis teamed together to discuss the results of a 5-year study which found that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. "To date we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 3).

Since we know school principals are crucial to leading schools in raising student achievement, retaining school leaders is vital. However, many top leaders in the profession are concerned about the loss of principals due to burnout and being overwhelmed with instructional and managerial responsibilities (Cook, 2015). We need to discover more about the office of the principal and what districts and policymakers can do to retain effective, high quality leaders in all of our schools.

Brief History of School Leadership

A look into the history of the title principal tells us it came from "the phrase 'principal teacher', a teacher who was designated by a mid-nineteenth-century school board to manage the non-classroom tasks of schooling a large number of students and turning in reports" (Cuban, 1988, p. 53). Interestingly, this role had some combination of managerial duties and instructional duties for over 150 years (Cuban, 1988; Rousmaniere, 2013; Sergiovanni, Kelleher, McCarthy, & Wirst, 2004). However, many principals continued to spend most of their days in the classroom while taking on extra administrative duties, causing the distinction between teacher and principal to be blurred.

According to Cubberley and Page (as cited in Rousmaniere, 2013), the first step to bring professionalism to the principalship was to physically separate the principal into his own office. The teacher moved from the podium of a classroom, to a separate non-classroom space. Educators of that time felt that moving the principal further away would give him more authority to control students and teachers (Rousmaniere, 2013). The principal became a professional administrator with expertise to supervise instruction. This actually became a strategy to enhance the role of the school leader. Parts of the dual-

role, managerial and instructional, prevailed from the early parts of the 19th century. Over the seven decades from 1911 to 1981, Cuban (1988) says the evidence suggests that in reality, "principals have spent most of their time on non-instructional tasks" (p. 61).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the disciplinarian and building manager role grew in popularity. In the 1970s the work of school principals centered almost entirely toward applying guidelines of established systems, being a deliverer of the bureaucratic rules of that time as well as rigid disciplinarians (Rousmaniere, 2013). Being an effective instructional leader began emerging in the 1980s and into the 1990s as more literature arose about the need for school-based management and facilitative leadership. A Nation at Risk and other reports stated our schools were ineffective and serious reform was needed (Hayes, 2004). The balance was tipped toward wide scale critique and reform, and school leaders stepped into a new age of accountability with public policy and initiatives being implemented (Murphy & Forsyth, 1999).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed by Congress in 1991, created a new list of federal mandates and the principal role continued to sway from the broad expectations of effective and efficient operations to a focus of accountability for student performance, as was measured by standardized tests. Also, principals needed strong interpersonal and culture-building skills to motivate and raise the climate of achievement. "Instead of working in an environment that expected and accepted unilaterally exercised authority, principals now functioned in a school world in which power was fractured and divided among various participants in the schooling enterprise" (Sergiovanni et al., 2004, p. 193).

The recession of 2008 brought reduced support for public schools, and with new federal policy, states were placed in competition with one another. The Federal Race to the Top vouchers, charter schools, virtual classes, and other alternatives to traditional schools, placed educational leaders in unusual circumstances (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). In June of 2010 the final Common Core State Standards (CCSS), K-12 standards in math and language arts, were released in an effort to have common expectations for students across the US (Anderson, Harrison, & Lewis, 2012). Most states adopting the standards cite the rigor of common core and the possibility that the standards would serve as a foundation for statewide educational improvement as important considerations in their decision to embrace the standards (Kober & Rentner, 2011).

Today's era of schooling insists on high expectations for students with improving test results of these new standards. Sometimes, school systems and leaders in the U.S. deal with implementation gaps when the goals differ from what is happening in classrooms, and leaders at the school level must take steps to lessen the causes of the gaps (Stewart, 2012). Therefore, attention should be focused on teaching and learning and how teachers can be more effective in the classroom. Yet, the managerial responsibilities will not disappear during the results-driven accountability model. "It is important to be mindful of the delicate balance educational leaders will have to maintain between managerial duties and instructional leadership" (Wong & Nicotera, 2007, p. 42).

Historically, educational leaders have always made important decisions that affect the students and lives of the next generation. Now, in this unstable era of war, terrorism, natural disasters, financial instability, accountability, and high-stakes testing, the

decision-making process can be even more daunting (Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. ix). Today, our principals face profound moral decisions regarding classrooms and schools. Aside from normal ethical decisions, there are crisis plans, psychological assistance, issues with social media and other threats that demand the time and attention of school leaders. Understanding the evolving role of the principalship in our nation's history helps us to realize the importance of school leaders and their role in our schools.

Significance of the Role of the Principal

In schools across America the principalship continues to be the core leadership position. "There is no position in America today more significant than a public school leader" (Houston, 2008, p. 16). There are numerous factors that affect student achievement, but the two that have the most influence are teacher quality and principal quality (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Aitken, 2006; Reeves, 2009). Within the practice of educational leadership, the majority of work surrounding school leaders focuses on the principal and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of his leadership practices.

Leadership can be defined as a relationship of influence (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). "Leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge, and potentially shaping the practice of followers" (Spillane & Diamond, 2007, p. 9). Thus, leadership is being redefined as the responsibility of everyone in the school (Lashway, 2003). Effective principals know how to elicit leadership from those who have the expertise in a specific area. Leadership comes by combining people, materials and organizational structures into a common goal with instructional processes being better guided than controlled (Lashway, 2003).

Educators and policymakers believe that learning should be the central theme of a school leader's job, guiding teachers to better instruction and students with motivation to succeed (Spiro, 2013). As part of this mentoring, Frederick Hess (2013) believes that cage busting, changing stifling routines and policies, will create conditions for improved leadership and learning. "And this is largely a question of finding smarter ways to employ talent, tools, time, and money" (p. 26). Fullan (2001) agrees that in our changing and complex society, leaders face the challenge of how to cultivate and sustain learning under the dynamic conditions of rapid change. Having competent, effective principals in our schools is necessary to meet these challenges.

The Nature of the Work of Principals

Instructional Leadership

Education professors and authors Jacky Lumby and Fenwick English (2010) wrote a book on leading schools that matched leadership to several metaphors including, leadership as machine, accounting, war, sport, theater, religion, and lunacy. Although school leaders are not coaches or actors, the nature of these roles has become embedded in school leadership. One of the most important functioning roles for principals on a daily basis is that of the instructional leader. In this role, the principal can educate his staff to assist students in reaching their academic potential. "The meaning of 'educate' comes from the Latin word 'educare' which means 'to bring forth.' The essence of what we must do as leaders is to use our abilities to help our teachers bring forth all that is within them so that they can do the same for children" (Houston, 2008, p. 11).

Educational leaders continue to be critical to the process of improving student learning through accountability and through supporting teachers with the skills for improvement. Grogan and Andrews (as cited in Wong & Nicotera, 2007) noted, "There is a direct link between what good teachers are able to do and the quality of the school where they teach. Furthermore, the school principal is a key lynchpin between teacher development and school improvement" (p. 38). Therefore, outside of effective teachers, the principalship is a pivotal position for improving learning in the school. It is imperative that school leaders focus on instructional improvement with the stakeholders inside the schoolhouse.

Effective instructional leadership relies on school leaders being able to recognize and support excellence in teaching as well as being able to eliminate ineffective teaching (Reeves, 2009). Day and Gurr (2014) wrote about the stories behind successful principals in order to identify reasons behind what made school leaders all over the world meet with success. This was part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP), which was the most comprehensive and coherent international comparative study of the principalship ever undertaken, being in progress for over a decade in more than 15 countries. In each case, these leaders were not satisfied with the status quo, always seeking to improve the schools in which they were working. They knew the importance of listening to other stakeholders and motivating them. "Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or ineffective not by who you are as a leader, but by what leadership you produce in others" (Fullan, 2001, p. 137).

One way that principals can be more effective instructional leaders is by leading those within the school through professional learning communities (PLCs). "The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning, however is not by micromanaging instruction but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community" (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 37). Then, professional development for teachers can happen in the workplace and continue on an ongoing basis. When teachers work together and focus on being responsive to students, their collaborative efforts can improve teaching and learning outcomes for students. (DuFour, 2007). These critical conversations can improve professional practice as they work toward shared leadership.

There will still be situations where the principal must take unilateral action, decisions that are non-negotiable, but collaborative efforts remain effective for improving instruction (Ricken, 2007). Researchers Loder and Spillane (2005) studied the roles of women principals in the US, and one of the recurring themes identified by these leaders was that principals could not improve achievement by themselves. Schools need to be designed around a team concept, not a hierarchy (Louis & Miles, 1990). School leaders can assist teachers by encouraging them to take on shared responsibility and accountability in teaching and learning. This shared or distributive leadership practice is expected to be put into place by principals when leading instruction in their schools.

Who are these principals of instructional leadership and are there common characteristics that set them apart from other school leaders? Dean Fink, who visited with school leaders in over 30 countries stated,

> Leaders of learning come in all shapes and sizes, genders, races, religions, backgrounds and contexts. These are not heroes, or even people uniquely blessed with leadership abilities (though they have these capacities in abundance). Instead, they are ordinary people who—through extraordinary commitment, effort, and determination—have become extraordinary, and have made the people around them exceptional. (as cited in Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2009, p. 44)

Schools that operate with the leader in a position of sole authority, tend to have weak school cultures, while school leaders who assign tasks to numerous individuals in the school tend to build strong cultures (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Karen Seashore Louis encourages principals to build cultures of excellence in instruction by consistently having instruction and learning as part of conversations in the school (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Then, collective responsibility for learning can occur while being built around a culture of trust.

The distributive perspective of leadership goes beyond the ideas and duties of the school principal in order to pay attention to other designated leaders in a school (Spillane, 2009). Instructional practices can then be guided rather than controlled, as other teacher leaders take responsibility (Lashway, 2003). When educational leaders focus on teacher motivations and working conditions, as well as the school's organizational culture and climate, the attitudes and instructional behavior of teachers can be altered, thus learning and student achievement can be positively impacted (Lashway, 2003).

Changing Roles and Job Related Stressors

A sense of passion is evident in the beginning of the journey into school leadership for many, but some wonder what it will take to sustain this passion over time (Brubaker & Williams, 2010). The status of school administrators has declined as

community challenges persist amid the effectiveness of policy directives from the local, state and federal levels.

> School leaders hold one of the most complex jobs in our society. They are pulled in many different directions while expected to be thoughtful decision makers, expert personnel managers, stern student disciplinarians, engaging public relations specialists, and skillful budget managers. (Johnston & Williamson, 2014, p. 17)

During the last 20 years, school reform initiatives have dramatically expanded and transformed the role of the principal. Increasingly, policy-makers hold schools, usually the school principal, accountable for school achievement (Spillane & Hunt, 2010).

Thus, juggling an increased workload for the school principal occurs. In 2002, Archer (as cited in Sergiovanni et al., 2004), reported that the National Association of Secondary School Principal's (NASSP) survey of middle school principals revealed that 50% of respondents work 60 hours or more each week as compared with just 12% in 1965. Principals from the study believed curriculum and instruction were priorities, yet they reported spending time and energy on tasks that had little to do with student learning or supporting teacher effectiveness. Even a survey on principals in Scotland from 2003 found ". . . that despite high levels of job satisfaction, school leaders reported themselves as heavily overloaded" (Murphy, 2013, p. 12). These issues demand immediate attention, since principals feel less effective at meeting the goals of the school (Sergiovanni et al., 2004).

A few years ago, the principalship seemed more desirable to future leaders. However, veteran principals have identified reasons for not staying in the position. The discouragements of the position included: pressures of the job and imbalance of the

position with their personal lives (Hammond, Muffs, & Sciascia, 2001). A number would

stay in the job if it were more manageable. "I would stay in the job if there were more job

satisfaction to offset the increased pressures" (Hammond et al., 2001, p. 31).

Expanded work leaves principals tired and some compromise priorities in their

personal lives which also increases stress. Administrator stress has always been around,

but with recent societal changes and the changing of the role of the school leader, stress

has become intolerable for many at times (Marshall & Casten, 1994). School leaders face

dilemmas each day that bring about stress, from complaints of angry parents, or new

teachers needing resources with a dwindling school budget, or legislative demands, to a

sick family member: ". . . any one problem would be manageable in good times, with

good support, workable guidelines and high energy. But administrators with few supports

and administrators with too many such problems cannot endure" (Marshall & Casten,

1994, p. 21). Decisions must be made when career, family, and values conflict. "Some

school administrators give up, others may crash under the pressures and leave their posts"

(Conley & Cooper, 2011, p. 2).

Identifying and understanding factors that trigger stress enable the school leader

to adopt management strategies. In the book by Brock and Grady (2002), *Avoiding*

Burnout: A Principal's Guide to Keeping the Fire Alive, they discuss that daily stress that

is short-lived is normal, but when it becomes prolonged and unrelenting, it can lead to

burnout which can exhibit itself in multiple ways from physical to spiritual. What are the

outcomes affecting physical and mental capabilities? Dealing with anxiety, depression or

difficulty sleeping can plague educators. Leaders may reveal physical problems such as

ulcers, alcoholism, high blood pressure and difficulty sleeping. The more serious

problems like strokes, heart attacks, and even suicides can strike stressed-out school

leaders (Marshall & Casten, 1994). Hayes (2004) explained,

> The fact that principals are continually dealing with problems makes the job physically and emotionally draining. When an administrator leaves the office at the end of the day, there will usually be unresolved situations that must be faced the next morning. To suggest that it is easy to put these matters aside at the end of a day would be simplifying reality. It is often not possible to avoid lying in bed thinking about difficult problems. Successful administrators develop ways to forget the job long enough to be responsive and positive companions for their family and friends. (p. 168)

School leaders can find ways to maintain their energy, commitment and

motivation. Leaders have the power to control their response to stress (Brock & Grady,

2002). Many administrators may enjoy years of success in one school, while for others,

staying too long in one position may cause the school leader to become bored or

dissatisfied. Linthicum (1994), as cited in Brock and Grady (2002), found that individuals

with more experience tend to suffer less burnout if that experience did not come from one

position. Holding different positions can create a positive effect and decrease burnout.

"Life without stress is impossible, but the mental and physical anguishes of stress are

manageable. In fact, administrators can learn to moderate, even capitalize on, the stress

inherent in their work" (Brock & Grady, 2002, p. 2). When school leaders find ways to

cope with the dilemmas of the workplace they can remain in the profession, but persistent

stress can be a causal factor to the turnover of principals, creating a shortage of qualified

applicants for the positions that are available (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010).

Bolman and Deal (2002) believe a key to becoming an effective leader is to develop powerful habits of mind through viewing common challenges through multiple lenses so the problem can be reframed.

> Only when you have multiple frames can you reframe. Reframing is a conscious effort to size up a situation from multiple perspectives and then find a new way to handle it. In times of crisis and overload, you will inevitably feel confused and overwhelmed if you are stuck with only one option. (Bolman & Deal, 2002, p. 3)

This technique can assist educators in gaining confidence in decision-making and lessen the anxieties that come when making difficult choices. It can be a powerful and practical way of thinking about how schools work (Bolman & Deal, 2002). Working in isolation can create anxiety as well, but networking with other principals, and even policymakers, can be used to lighten the load on the principalship (Hess, 2005).

Principal Shortages/Turnover

During the past 15–20 years, there have been reports of principal shortages. In a 1998 survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, it was found that nearly half of the school districts surveyed reported having difficulty filling their principal vacancies (Potter, 2001). In 2007, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) gathered data on several states and their progress with school leadership. Texas was able to certify 7,000 administrators over a 4-year period, which was enough to replace principals at all schools, yet they reported lacking candidates of quality needed to lead their schools to excellence. The SREB (2002) also found Georgia had 3,200 certified administrators not leading schools, while they had just less than 2,000 schools. Urban schools, especially at

the high school level, still reported difficulty filling openings with quality principal candidates. Therefore, there appears to be a trend of licensed candidates either uninterested in the principalship or unable to find positions in desired schools.

In education, most principals were previously classroom teachers, so they represent the largest pool of possible candidates. In a study by Winter et al. (2004), they surveyed 194 certified teachers including those with administrative licensure, but less than 10% of respondents would consider applying for a principal vacancy. Teachers in the study felt their personal life and job satisfaction would be negatively affected. This would indicate there may not be enough interested educators pursuing school leadership. The idea of a principal shortage has been looming in educational circles, not just in the United States, and there is evidence that exists for the concern (Sergiovanni et al., 2004). "More and more principals in almost every Western country are retiring early" (Fullan, 2001, p. 141). So, other countries face principal shortages as well.

What factors affect having a shortage of principals? In 2014, Fullan reported that in a 2013 survey from Metropolitan Life Insurance Company that principals felt under great stress "several days a week," and the percentage that say they were satisfied in their work had dropped from 68 to 59% since 2008. Also, 90% of principals "think they are the ultimately accountable person" (p. 5). It is possible the demands of the job influence the tenure of principals and their decisions to stay or leave their schools and/or the profession.

A shortage or high turnover rate of school leaders can have a negative impact upon school achievement and school cultures as "the principal is second only to the

teacher in terms of impact on student learning" (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5). When teachers were asked what criteria they wanted in schools where they work, the top two qualities were: "the quality of their colleagues and the quality of school leadership" (Fullan, 2014, p. 5). Thus, a key to generating widespread impact on student learning would be to keep quality principals in place to direct the work of quality teachers.

With the high turnover rate at some schools, particularly those in urban areas, it can be difficult to hire and retain experienced and proven school leaders for the most challenging schools (David & Cuban, 2010). In a 2008 study of principals in Texas schools, completed by researchers Fuller and colleagues, they found the turnover rates were higher in schools in which more than 50% of the students were economically disadvantaged. They explained, "the consequences of leadership instability in such schools are most severe, where sustained support for school improvement is critical to improve student achievement" (p. 2). The expectation was for principals to remain in schools at least three years; yet, in 2007, 53% of principals had left within three years, with the rates gradually increasing over time. Data from a few states gathered by Viadero (2009) found that only about half of beginning principals remained in the same job five years later and many of those leave the principalship altogether when they go.

In a 2011 study of principal turnover in Illinois Public Schools (IPS), over 72% of Illinois principals who changed positions moved to administrative jobs, with 11% moving to assistant principal positions and 10% back to teaching in IPS (DeAngelis & White, 2011). The authors looked at turnover from 2001 to 2008, while a previous study by the

RAND Corporation focused on the 1987 to 2001 period. Turnover rates for all principals

and for first-time principals were significantly higher during the period of 2001-2008

than they were during the earlier study. There was a 79.1% retention rate average from

2001 to 2008 as compared to the 86% retention rate from 1987 to 2001 period, revealing

a significant decline. Therefore, we can conclude that the principal shortage in IPS has

grown over the last 30 years and district administrators are under more pressure to recruit

new principals. It is possible the lower retention of school leaders could reflect the

increasing emphasis placed on accountability. With first-time Chicago principals, 37.2%

had left the system altogether during their first six years as compared with 19% in the

earlier study.

In the same DeAngelis and White (2011) study, principals in low-achieving

schools were more likely to leave their schools than those in the highest performing

elementary, middle, and high schools. Also, principals whose schools did not make AYP

were less likely to remain in their schools and less likely to remain in the district. "The

impact of principal reassignment decisions likely depends on the effectiveness of

principals who are moved. District administrators need to consider both the potential

costs and benefits of moving principals across schools" (DeAngelis & White, 2011, p.

25).

Other researchers, like Thomson (2009), have found evidence that shortages occur

in particular geographic locations and types of schools. Also, he found a reluctance of

significant numbers of teachers willing to consider the headship. There remains a gender

and race bias in the principalship as more female teachers enter the field of education, but

the majority of administrators are white males, leaving minority school leaders as a small percentage (Loder & Spillane, 2005; Thomson, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education in 1997 (as cited in Loder & Spillane, 2005) found women constitute 73% of the teaching workforce, but are represented in fewer than 35% of all principalships.

> Supply constitutes a significant risk for schools and for the education system. It is a risk which must be managed; it cannot be avoided. The potential harm to students of having large numbers of senior leaders leave at around the same time must be minimized. In order to manage this risk, education systems are banking on succession planning as their major risk management strategy. (Thomson, 2009, p. 27)

Therefore, the research tells us principal turnover is occurring in schools, particularly those in urban schools and in specific geographic locations. There are educators who received an educational leadership license, but choose not to take jobs in school leadership. Also, we know more school leaders are identifying stress as a factor in leaving their schools. Since school leaders impact instruction significantly through their work with teachers and students, it is important to understand the factors influencing principal turnover and cited shortages.

Principal Retention/Supports

Due to possible shortages and/or lack of highly qualified candidates for all school settings, it is critical to be able to identify, recruit and hire qualified replacements. This has become a challenge due to the more difficult job conditions that current principals face in our time of new curricular standards, accountability, and high stakes testing. Fullan (2001) agrees that "more and more potential teacher leaders are concluding that it is simply not worth it to take on the leadership of schools" (p. 141). Being an effective

instructional leader, along with carrying out the other duties of the principalship, takes time and experience. They create a school environment where staff is supported and where the parents, students, and teachers have a voice in helping each other to achieve common goals (David & Cuban, 2010).

Despite many principals reaching their retirement age and leaving, principals on the whole are getting older (Sergiovanni et al., 2004). One explanation could be that districts are hiring older replacements with considerable teaching experience. Also, with the nationwide movement to hold educators responsible for their students' scores on tests, it could be prompting some districts and school boards to oust school leaders not producing expected results. In addition, some school leaders could choose to retire earlier than usual due to the pressures of the job.

Supporting principals throughout their careers, not just when they are new to leadership, can be instrumental in keeping them in their leadership positions (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Finding ways to assess strengths and weaknesses would be beneficial while providing specific staff development to help the individual principal improve. All principals could use support in data use and leading effective data discussions. Continuing with mentoring and coaching programs would provide principals support from veteran colleagues. In a study by Braun and Carlson (2008), they looked at the best way to provide support to school leaders and initially thought school leaders should be divided by career stages for staff development, but they concluded that a heterogeneous grouping of principals brought better results. Braun and Carlson (2008) found that "Novice principals learned from listening to experts articulate their thinking on

leadership dilemmas and issues . . . veteran principals benefited from the fresh perspectives and probing questions of aspiring and novice principals" (p. 35). Willen (2001) explained, "Many principals say the support they get from their colleagues is part of what keeps them in the job" (p. 49).

States and districts could reconsider early retirement options through restructuring to make longer service more attractive. In the study of the Illinois Public Schools, about two-thirds or 65.6% of all principals who left their positions, cited retirement as the reason for leaving (DeAngelis & White, 2011). "The money saved through early retirement programs is not worth the loss of experienced administrators" (Potter, 2001, p. 37). Changing retirement policies or offering additional incentives for principals to stay in the profession longer, could lessen the shortage in IPS and most likely other school districts as well.

New and early career teachers need support to remain in schools over time and similar support is needed for principals, particularly those new to the profession. Many districts implement some type of mentoring or support program through staff development meetings. The effectiveness of these programs varies among districts and the quality of the supports given. Special training and incentive programs for new leaders could attract more highly qualified candidates. Districts may pay out bonuses for leading these schools over a period of time, with increased amounts given when goals are met. Schools with higher proportions of at-risk students and less-qualified teachers were disadvantaged in their ability to attract and retain principals (Papa, 2007). Higher salaries can be used to compensate for these disparities according to the results of the study.

States and districts would benefit from measuring their own principal retention/turnover rates in order to understand the reasons so that they can develop supports to improve the conditions and promote longer tenure of effective school leaders.

Leading a happy and productive school is an experience that can bring a deep sense of satisfaction. The position of a school principal can lead to an exciting, meaningful, and essential career (Hayes, 2004). "It is essential for the future of American education that a new generation of leaders steps forward, committed to improving the educational opportunities of our nation's children" (Hayes, 2004, p. 162). We need to ensure our society has an ongoing supply of well-prepared individuals to assume the leadership of our schools.

> If there is one overall conclusion we would offer based on the past two decades of study of beginning principals in America, it would be that the job has become increasingly complex, more difficult, and with intense and unreasonable pressures to solve a broad menu of education, social, and personal problems. At this time, the demands for accountability, maintaining a safe environment, and serving all the needs of children (and many needs of their parents) means that in reality no one person can do it all . . . We also are very concerned about how long they can survive in the pressure cooker that the principalship has become. (Shoho & Barnett, 2010, pp. 2–3)

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 demonstrates how the ideas for this study have developed. According to Joseph Maxwell (2005), "the conceptual framework for your study—the system of concepts, assumptions, and theories—is a key part of the design and direction you will go" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33).
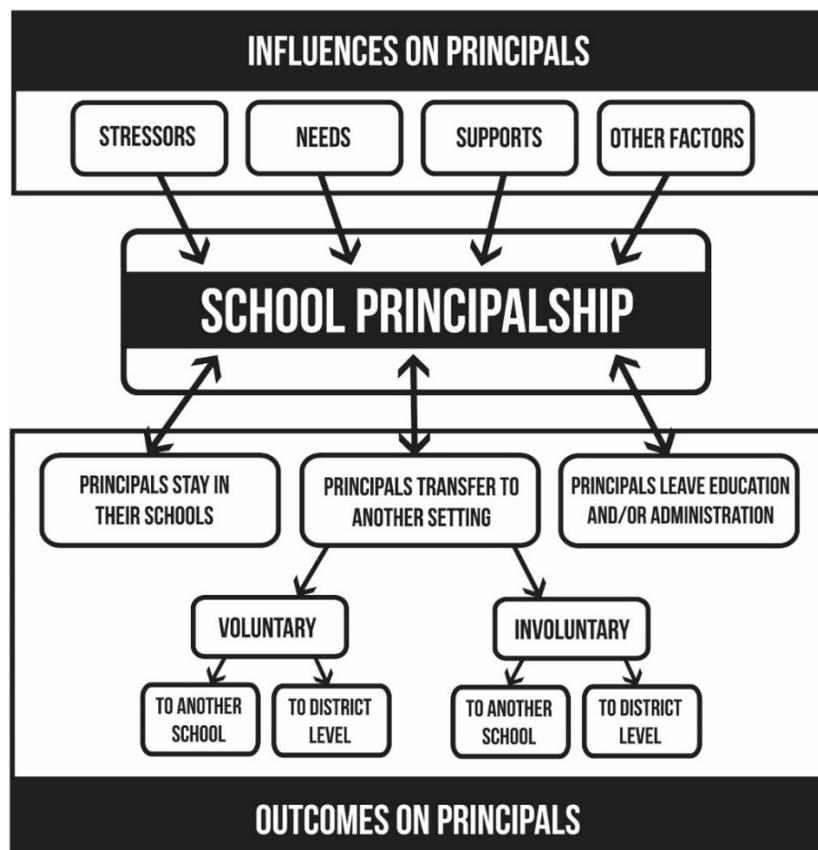
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

In Figure 1, I drafted a diagram of what I believe is the best way to describe the complexity of factors that may relate to whether school principals remain or leave their assigned schools. I included categories for influences on principals, and outcomes on principals. Within the outcomes, I thought about the possible consequences that positive and negative influences can have upon school leaders. Some will stay in their schools, some will transfer schools while others could leave education. My own experiences in leading schools helped me to identify these categories for the conceptual framework and the review of the literature confirmed my initial thoughts. Identifying stressors and supports related to the position, and their relationship to principal retention, is important

to the study. Also, gathering data on whether principals make changes voluntarily or involuntarily when they change positions is vital to the study.

Conclusions

The literature review reveals how the duties of the principal have changed over time, from being a position of managing to leading. Today's era of schooling insists on high expectations for students with improving test results of these new standards. Understanding the evolving role of the principalship in our nation's history helps us to realize the importance of school leaders and their role in our schools. Guiding teachers to improve instruction will in turn motivate more students to succeed; thus, learning needs to be the central theme of the principal position. Support of professional learning communities (PLCs) and distributing leadership responsibilities were two of the ways mentioned in literature that principals can lead instructionally.

School reform issues from the last two decades have dramatically expanded and transformed the role of the principal, also increasing the accountability of school leaders. There are more stressors principals must navigate while pinpointing the resources and supports needed to move schools forward. These leaders can control their response to stress and find ways to maintain their energy and commitment. However, the inability to navigate the duties of the principalship, with an ever-increasing workload, has contributed to higher turnover rates and sometimes shortages of highly qualified candidates, particularly in urban areas. New and veteran principals need support over time to lead effective schools. Having clear expectations for school leaders and making supports available can lead to higher retention rates of school leaders. The next chapter

will outline the methodology used for this research and how the narrative type interview

study allowed the stories of individual principals to be heard.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Tradition

The qualitative research approach chosen to conduct the gathering of information and data for this study included elements of narrative research. Lichtman (2010) states that narrative research has "a specific focus on the stories told by individuals" and that it "begins with the experiences as expressed in the lived and told stories of individuals" (p. 54). My objective was to use the interview process to gain a sharpened understanding of the factors that influence principals to stay in their schools and the reasons why some principals leave. I used the stories that came from these individuals to reveal the struggles that today's principals face in leading schools that may influence them to remain, or change to other schools or positions. Using a narrative-type interview study as a method of research, allowed the stories of individual principals to be heard.

I focused on in-depth examinations of principals in two categories. First, I examined those who have been a principal for five or more years, some whom have been in the same school as well as those who could have been in multiple schools, obtaining details on how they have endured the challenges of the positions. Then, I interviewed and identified factors relating to how principals with four or less years of experience are able to navigate the school leadership role. The significance of their experiences as it relates to principal retention and turnover will be discussed. Creswell (2007) asserts, "We conduct

qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices" (pp. 39–40). Interviewees are encouraged to tell their stories about their experiences in their own way and from their own perspectives, remembering how it felt at the time, and the researcher collects, codes, categorizes, and highlights concepts and themes from the data.

Key Concepts and Terms

The following are key concepts and terms essential for the study:

1. Principal turnover- When a school leader leaves his or her building to accept a leadership role at another school location or leaves to accept a different position in education or leaves the profession.

2. Principal retention – When a school leader chooses to remain in his or her current school.

3. Stressors – Situations that principals experience as negative causing them to feel pressured, agitated or otherwise uncomfortable.

4. Supports – Factors that cause a school principal to experience positive feelings toward his or her role as leader and may impact his or her ability to remain at one school.

Research Setting/Participants

In order to collect data that allowed me to tell the personal stories of principals, the narrative method of interviewing participants was used. It allowed for gathering the perspectives of a variety of school leaders, and I was able to interview nine current or

former principals. A major characteristic of selecting principals for interviews in the

research setting was determined by location. Research participants were current or former

leaders at schools in two school districts in the central North Carolina or Piedmont area.

Working with principals in this locality promoted ease of access in interviews. I

interviewed principals with experience at the elementary, middle and high school levels,

and selected individuals who differed in years of principalship experience to establish a

broader perspective of viewpoints. Two areas of school leadership experiences were the

focus of the study. First, veteran principals with five years or more of principalship

experience were interviewed. Then, those with four years or less of total experience as

school leaders were interviewed. Data was gathered from school leaders who stayed at

the same school for multiple years and those who had been at different schools during

their years in school leadership. Gathering data from veteran principals as well as the

novice leaders, provided a broader range of perspectives in revealing supports and

stressors of the position. Also, data were gathered from both male and female principals,

as well as white and minority leaders, in an attempt to reach a cross-section of

participants.

I relied on my knowledge base of principal movement within two local districts to

access individuals who remained in the principalship in the same school, those who

transferred schools and those who had left the principalship for other positions.

Interviewing school leaders that are male and female, as well as white and minority

candidates yielded a variety of participants in the interview study, impacting insights

gained.

Data Collection

The primary objective of this study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they remain. If they left a principalship, I identified factors that may have influenced them, as some may have left voluntarily while others leave under pressure. My study addresses the experiences of those individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools or why they stayed. Therefore, I used interviews of current or former principals to gather empirical information. I determined factors that may influence why a principal remains in a school or stressors that may influence him or her leaving a site. Also, I identified supports that may cause a principal to remain longer in a school. The interviews were conducted in person at a location convenient for the school leader. An interview protocol was used (see Table 1).

Table 1

Interview Questions/Protocol

Interview Questions/Protocol
1) Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2) What is your background in education?
3) What led you to become an administrator?
4) Tell me about your career as a principal. (Let them talk; use follow-up questions below as needed.)
a. Tell me about your work in each of the schools where you served as a principal. (Ask questions below for each school, as needed.)
i. How long did you stay at this school?
ii. Why did you stay as long as you did?
iii. What were the rewards of working at the school?
iv. What supports kept you at the school?

Table 1

Cont.

Interview Questions/Protocol

      1. What type of support, if any, did you receive from your district at this school? Was it helpful?
      2. What other supports would have been helpful to you at this school?
   v. What were the things that made the position difficult or stressful?
      1. Accountability, school budgets, relationships with supervisors, school safety issues, school violence, and unrealistic expectations are all possible stressors for principals. Which of these, if any, were significant stressors for you in this school?
  vi. Did you experience any health issues at this school that you believe were related to your role as principal? Please elaborate.
 vii. Were you able to balance your personal and professional lives while you were at this school? Please explain.
      1. What impact did the balance between your personal and professional life have on your staying at or leaving this school?
viii. Why did you leave the school?
  ix. Did you leave voluntarily, or where you encouraged to leave?
5) What advice do you wish someone would have given to you before you assumed your first school leadership position?
6) Is there anything else you would like to add concerning the school principalship and the factors that cause educators to leave that position or to remain?

Note. Interviews were conducted in person at a location convenient for the school leader.

Data Analysis

The interview sessions were recorded and later transcribed. For each interview, I reviewed the transcripts and identified connections, themes and concepts that were related. The interviews were coded using a color-coded spreadsheet to separate the data into themes and categories. Portions from each interview were highlighted that could be used in narrative form to tell the story of each principal. I was able to identify key components from the transcripts that were related to my research questions. Perspectives

of the veteran principals, along with the novice principals, were categorized relating to the research questions. Themes from the interviews were identified and connections among the respondents were cross-referenced.

Analysis of the data revealed implications and recommendations for educators who choose to enter the principalship role. By interviewing both male and female, as well as, white and minority leaders, themes related to gender or ethnicity of the principals interviewed was not significantly relevant. Specific findings that correlated with years of experience, level of school led, gender or ethnicity as related to turnover/retention, were included in the data analysis. I identified stressors which could derail principals in their schools as well as the supports needed to prolong their tenure in schools. For those school leaders who have endured, factors that led to their success were cross-referenced and identified.

Next, I explained the evidences that did not seem to fit the original research questions; yet, are significant to the reader. These outliers revealed the conflicting examples to the themes and concepts, and I expounded on whether these were significant to the study. Then, any silences, things I expected to find but did not, are discussed. Are any of these silences significant? Finally, I reviewed the data in comparison to the literature to determine the prevalence and connection of the identified themes and any possible omissions or gaps in the research.

Researcher Subjectivity

I am currently working as a middle school principal and have a vested interest in my own success in this position. I am familiar with many of the schools and school

districts in the central region of North Carolina due to being an educator in the area for over 25 years. Also, I have personal knowledge about a number of employees in the principalship position and those in the central office due to my work contacts. Although I functioned in the role of researcher for this study, I continued in the position of a middle school administrator while completing the interviews and data analysis. Previous interactions with administrators and other district staff within each organization tended to create impressions that principals may have stayed or left for particular reasons. This awareness, if not acknowledged, could lead the researcher to collect, analyze, and interpret data in a nonobjective manner. I exercised my objectivity by relying on the stated interview questions (Table 1) to direct the sessions and did not allow off-topic conversations.

My district had substantial movement in school leadership in recent years. Currently, I hold personal opinions as to why some principals have a longer tenure than others in this position. I believe some principals enter their schools with the skillset needed to meet the needs of those in the building. However, other leaders lack the foundation needed to lead schools forward without receiving supports from colleagues and district leaders. After several years in the position, some veteran principals are influenced by a high degree of stress from mandates at the state and federal levels, which are bombarding schools. I was anxious to learn from the interviewees about the stressors, influences and supports that negatively or positively impact their decisions to remain or leave. This assisted in confirming whether my perceived issues of lack of skill set and changing policy mandates have a direct effect on principal tenure.

Since Lichtman (2010) acknowledges that the researcher acts as a filter through which all data is collected, organized and interpreted, she believes it is impossible to be objective in conducting research. I recognized the biases and assumptions in my current role and how that may have shaped my research. My own upbringing as a white middle-class female affects the lens I use to view and analyze the experiences of other administrators. Having worked in four school districts of varying sizes and demographics, these experiences also affected my perspective of the challenges and rewards of working in particular schools. It was necessary to make conclusions from the data gathered, and not make assumptions based on my own work as a school leader. Once the interviews were transcribed, I allowed the study participants to check interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and objective reporting.

As the sole researcher in this study, I must acknowledge that my first-hand experiences with staff and leaders in local school districts can influence my objectivity. Therefore, I protected against this subjectivity by initially divulging what I know about any of the principals included in the study, and simultaneously admitted any knowledge about the reasons he or she may have remained or left a particular school. I attempted to achieve my goal to collect, analyze, and interpret the data outside of my opinions, values, and previous knowledge of each principal, school, and/or school district. As I function daily in the role of principal, I used the knowledge of this position to establish a connection with each person interviewed, but not in a way that would influence their open and honest opinions.

Trustworthiness

I implemented a variety of strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Interviewing individuals in two school districts and those working at a variety of levels of schooling and experience, allowed the researcher to identify different perspectives, potential gaps, and possible variance among what promotes retention or turnover of principals. Ensuring that the interviews dug below surface concepts to gain greater depth assisted with the trustworthiness of the data. When the voices of the principals are allowed to be heard, the reader will understand the significance and meaning behind the data. I cross-referenced all interview information in an effort to triangulate data between what individual principals say about the stressors and/or supports influencing their likelihood to stay or leave their current position. Also, by pinpointing the reasons principals shared for staying or leaving, and what role they stepped into next, added to the trustworthiness of the study. Then, I utilized member checking by allowing principals that participated in the study to review the data collection to determine if they were in agreement with the information collected from their respective interviews. After reviewing the transcripts of their interviews, participants were encouraged to provide any additional thoughts related to the study. By using a variety of these trustworthiness strategies, it added credibility to the overall study.

Finally, as the researcher I provided a set of recommendations in the analysis based on the implications of the data gathered. These recommendations provide readers and schools with a full account of the various factors that influence retention or turnover of school principals. Each of the audio files were stored on a password protected hard

drive and the interview transcripts were kept as a hard copy in a locking file cabinet inside an office.

Benefits and Risks of the Study

One of the greatest benefits for participants of this study was the opportunity for current and former principals to share their story regarding the principalship at their respective schools. I believe this reflective experience yielded increased awareness of the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that affected their successful tenure in schools or reasons for turnover. For those who shared negative experiences, having their voice heard by others was a therapeutic way for them to reflect and deal with their derailment. When participants are asked to explain their motivations and experiences, they too learn from this process of reflection, identifying attributes about their personal preferences and best practices that can be used to improve their leadership in schools. Those school leaders with positive stories to share were able to reveal the supports and the influences that permitted them to stay in their assigned schools and/or to stay in a principal position.

Most participants gained a sense of satisfaction from telling their own stories. The risks for the principal participants in this study were minimal, as the IRB guidelines were followed. Principals had their own identities, as well as identities to their schools and districts, protected. Guidelines were followed for securing study participants, protecting confidentiality and the destroying of related documents.

Several risks are acknowledged with this study. Due to identifying principals in the Piedmont region of North Carolina only, principals, schools and districts may potentially be identified for their participation. To protect against this, pseudonyms were

utilized for each school, school district and individual participant. In reporting the results of the study, demographic attributes of the school leaders were shared in a composite table in order to protect their confidentiality.

It was also possible that participants might be unwilling to be forthright in interviews if they fault district leaders for not offering the supports needed to be successful. If district leaders used any negative coercion techniques to move the principal from his or her current position, the study may not gain all details and truthful answers in learning about the movement of principals. I attempted to minimize each of these risks by ensuring participants that the study was for research purposes only, and results were not going to be shared with local school staff or central administration.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. Only a small research group of nine participants was used to gather data. When interviews were conducted, did the principals willingly respond to all questions? Participants may have been less likely to be completely honest in their interpretations since the fear of losing confidentiality may have been higher by working with a local researcher. Also, it is possible that the final implications for other principals and educators may not be transferable to all school districts. Schools across the state and nation will differ in their principal stability issues. While working conditions may affect principal retention in some districts, in others, salary and socioeconomic status of schools may be a greater influence affecting turnover. Due to the smaller sampling of participants, it may be difficult to pinpoint these factors.

Summary

The responsibilities of the school principal continue to grow over time. We know that principal positions carry a variety of responsibilities and that the expectations seem to be increasing, causing pressure and stress to these individuals. When principals experience too much stress, they sometimes leave their schools. This can occur voluntarily or principals may be coerced in taking another role. As growing numbers of principals resign and/or retire, fewer qualified people are applying to fill these vacancies (Fenwick, 2000). In 2011, the National Bureau of Economic Research released a study stating that one out of every five principals leaves his or her school each year (Béteille et al., 2011).

Since we know school principals are crucial to leading schools in raising student achievement, retaining school leaders is vital. High-quality principals can lead to better prepared teachers working toward higher learning outcomes (Baker & Cooper, 2005). However, we have little information about why principals leave their schools and/or districts. The purpose of this study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their position, or why they remain. My study seeks to address the experiences of those individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools or why they stay.

Recent policy mandates at the state and federal levels have added more demands to the principalship, without the extra funding or personnel to make it happen. However, this study allowed me to gather information from a variety of school leaders, in an objective method, to further my knowledge of this subject. Hearing their stories allowed

me to identify themes and connections about the principal role and I was then able to identify factors that influenced principal retention. The authors and their literary works identified some possible areas of concern for principal movement. However, being able to hear the dilemmas and scenarios that actually impact the local principals in today's public schools was enlightening. To me, nothing can be as relevant and honest as the voices of the practitioners. It is my goal that their experiences will be heard through their voices by their colleagues, as well as district and state educators and policymakers.

CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND THEMES

Introduction

The rationale for this narrative study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they remain in them. My study sought to address the experiences of these individuals, telling their stories, including their stressors and unmet needs or describing their external supports they perceive causing them to stay. If someone left the principalship, I sought to determine if the educator transferred to another school, took a central office position, returned to being an assistant principal or left the profession altogether.

Profiles

As the researcher, I focused on identifying and interviewing nine participants, in two categories of experiences: (a) four years or less of principal experience, and (b) five years or more of principal experience. These school leaders came from two differing school districts within central North Carolina. Since my focus was to identify reasons for remaining or leaving the principalship, I sought to study both male and female, and white and minority leaders. In addition, some principals stayed at one school only, some worked in multiple schools, some left for central office, and some returned to the assistant principalship. Specifically, six of the participants were female and three were male. There were four African-American participants and five white participants. Their

current or most recent level of school led included two at the elementary level, three at

the middle school level, and four at the high school level. Four participants had four years

or less of principal experience and five participants had five years or more of experience.

The first two interviewees left the principalship; the next four remained in the

principalship but worked in a variety of schools within one or two districts. The last three

participants had only worked as principals at one school. See Table 2 for characteristics

of the school leaders interviewed.

Table 2

Characteristics of School Leaders Interviewed

	Gender		Race		School			Years of Experience		Principalship		
	M	F	AA	W	ES	MS	HS	≤ 4	≥ 5	1S	2+S	L
P1		x	x				x	x				x
P2		x	x			x		x				x
P3		x		x	x				x			
P4	x			x			x		x		x	
P5		x		x			x		x		x	
P6	x		x				x		x		x	
P7		x		x		x		x		x		
P8		x		x		x			x	x		
P9	x		x		x			x		x		

Note. P = participant; M = male; F = female; AA = African American; W= White; ES = elementary school; MS = middle school; HS = high school; < 4 Exp = less than or equal to four years of experience; > 5 Exp = greater than or equal to five years of experience; 1S = principalship at one school; 2+S = principalship at two or more schools; L = left principalship.

I would like to begin sharing the results of the data analysis by introducing the

nine educators who participated in the interviews and shared their stories. The first two

interviewees left the principalship; the next four remained in the principalship but worked

in a variety of schools within one or two districts. The last three participants had only

worked as principals at one school.

Principals Who Left the Principalship

Cara

My first interviewee was an African American female, Cara, who had been a

principal for less than four years. Her interest in education came as a young child, but

when she struggled some in high school, it motivated her to become a high school teacher

so that she could help others during those important years. After she noticed that students

needed more than content knowledge to be successful, she got a Master's in counseling to

support students in other areas. Her experience as a classroom teacher and a counselor,

both at the middle and high school levels, gave her a strong foundation for understanding

how schools operate.

Cara admitted that starting off she never wanted to be a principal, "I felt like it

was too much accountability, too much accountability you know, too many things can go

wrong and you're the person to blame for it . . ." However, working in the counselor

position she felt she could have a larger influence on students.

> . . . you as a counselor are often shifted into, you know, that principal seat. But, I
> also got to be close enough to the principal to realize how some of the decisions
> that they make you want to impact that change, you may say well that wasn't a
> good decision, I would have done this if I was the principal. And so, you know, as

> I started to kind of have those feelings I started thinking well maybe I could make a larger influence on students if I decided to become a principal.

She began in administration as an assistant principal before moving to a central office support position and eventually to principalship.

While in her first and only principalship position, she participated in staff development where an outside consultant came in to help the staff assimilate to a new leader by having conversation with them (away from the school leader) where they could share their concerns and expectations surrounding their new leader. Cara shared how this type of staff development was beneficial.

> I got to see all their thoughts. And I got to look at them, those that I could respond to and speak to I spoke to very transparently, and the ones that I couldn't answer, which were very few responses, then I just told them, you know, give me some time. One of those questions I guess that she asked them, I also spoke to the things that they wanted to see in terms of a leader, so it let me know exactly what their expectations were of me, and it also served to me almost like, something I could go back to the whole time I was there to determine whether or not they were seeing the qualities that they expected to see.

She attributed this staff development as one of the supports she received that made her experience positive in leading the school. Being able to converse with other principals in a formal cohort group also proved to be supportive.

> I had actually gone through the Distinguished Leadership and Practice. It's a program that's through the state department, and so that was very, that was a very big support because they aligned their professional developments, it's yearlong, they align it with our standards for school executives, and so when you think about the work that you're doing in your schools, they provided us with resources, and there were also principals across the state that I could kind of hear ideas as well as hear concerns when we come together for our classes.

Her school was part of a grant-funded program that had multiple supports including

coaches that regularly visited her and her school.

> That's part of their program, you have a, also, almost like a curriculum coach too, so you have a leadership coach and you'll have an instructional coach, is what he is called . . . so you know, you have all these different lenses from those folks to give you insight as you're thinking through things. So, I think that that's always a good thing, and they don't have any type of allegiance to the district or anything like that.

Cara turned to local education professionals, former principals, to assist her with specific

tasks such as budget.

> So for me, handling a budget, you know, handling a school budget, I had not had that experience as an assistant principal, and so when I had budgetary questions, I knew that I could contact Sasha Goins, because she had been one of my professors from the MSA program. I trusted her, you know, expertise as well as you know, just a professional, someone I could talk to, so I could contact her. She'd say, "Share your screen," we'd talk through whatever questions I had about budgets.

However, she also discussed stressors in the position, especially for being a leader in a

small school.

> I think the stress sometimes too with a small staff is that all of their problems are right on your doorstep, you know, with a larger staff, you may know that somebody's upset with you, or you may know that there's some grumblings, but I don't feel as though you're as in touch with staff, and I think that it's also a lot easier for your environment to become toxic than when it's just a small staff because everybody's right there, on top of each other.

> Being part of a small school environment, with no assistant principals, could also

be lonely and a source of stress. Cara shared, "Particularly, when you are the only one,

trust and loyalty become such a big factor, and when you are the lone ranger amongst the other folks who've had that opportunity to work together, that could be very stressful." Cara also spoke to the particular stress you can experience as a principal from the high expectations that are placed upon you. "People get so much pressure that they have to be perfect in everything, and if they're not perfect in everything then that becomes an issue, you know." Cara left the principalship after several years, not due to the stresses of the position (although she identified some in her interview), but because it was her plan to move beyond school leadership to the district level. While in her interview for her first principalship, the superintendent inquired about her five-year plan. She mentioned she would like to be in a doctoral program and move toward working at the district level.

> . . . when I walked out of there I thought to myself, I'm not going to do that in five years, why in the world, why in the world did I say that, I would not be able to go back to school, I would not, you know, this will not happen, and then in two and a half years the position becomes available and so for me it became a decision of thinking will this, when will this position become available again, how does it feel if, you don't just you know, put your name out there to see if, you know, this is something that you're to do and then really know that's what you want to do you know . . .

Even though Cara was one of the principals that stayed in the principalship for less than four years, she shared some comments on why she remained in the position as long as she did. Since she led a school with a smaller student population, she spoke of the advantages.

> Oh, I loved it, I think that for me it was an opportunity-in a small learning community, I think that you have the ability to shift your work quicker, you know, like say for example if you have a vision over what you say could be an

improvement for your school and for your students, with it being small, you can bring your staff around that vision very quickly and put it into play.

In addition, she felt she had grown as a leader while being a principal and could have continued that growth had a new opportunity not have arisen.

> I felt like I had a whole lot more growth that I could do for myself professionally as a principal, so I would have stayed longer if this position hadn't come available but I did feel like I had made a significant amount of growth at that school, and I also had made a lot of growth for myself in terms of understanding and accepting that accountability and really looking at how you build a vision and a plan around moving a school forward, so I felt like I had gotten a lot of those experiences, and I knew realistically that I probably could have gotten much more by staying longer, but it was a decision that you make.

After a few years as a principal, she applied, and she was chosen, for a central office leadership position, moving up even sooner than her original five-year plan. When I asked her if a higher salary or a matching salary would have kept her at her school, she commented, "Salary was not an influence in terms of staying or whether I would leave, and I think that for a lot of folks when they're ready to go, that's not a determining factor for them either." She spoke about the differences of working at a district administrative level, compared to working as a school principal and how you cannot make as many decisions at the higher level.

> When I think about now being in this central office position and what I liked about the principalship, I liked the autonomy, even though I think that some principals will feel like they don't have it, but you don't realize how much of it that you have until you make a shift, so I liked the autonomy . . . Because as a principal, you know, you just make the decisions, you—well for me, I know I did, I made my decisions. I wasn't calling all over here before I could do something, and you did it, and you set the rules around those decisions for the most part. But you know, in the other role, these rules and expectations were governed and it was

a lot, and now I have found that they're a lot more restrictive in this role, so positions of influence do not carry power.

Since Cara had a positive, successful experience as a principal, she did not state any supports she felt she should have been given but did not receive.

Kim

Interviewee number two, Kim, was an African American female, currently working as an assistant principal, in the same district she had formerly been a principal for four years. She was one of just two principals interviewed who had left the principalship. Initially, she had not planned to be an educator. Kim went to college to obtain a science degree and did a little teaching before completing her Master's in science. She really enjoyed working with students, so she stayed in education and never pursued work in her original field.

Kim discussed how she first became interested in being an administrator.

Well, I think it started with just taking on different kind of roles at my middle school I was working at, doing summer school, helping with scheduling, and starting to see the school from a different aspect, outside of the teaching aspect, and what are the other things that play into the success of a school besides what just goes on in the classroom. I really enjoyed it, really enjoyed working in the school in that way, so I started talking to my principal at the time about you know, being a principal and, you know, he encouraged me to pursue it.

Therefore, at the urging of one of her principals, she was interested in school leadership and worked in some form of administration for eight years. "I've been an assistant principal, a principal, and now I'm an assistant principal again."

Kim went from teaching middle school, to being an assistant principal at a high

school for almost four years. Then, she was named as a principal at a highly impacted

middle school. Kim discussed the supports she received at this school, including

mentoring.

> I had two mentors, the first mentor was my—my mentor as my first year as a principal, which was assigned by the county, and that person was great, but the frequency at which that person was available just wasn't great, because they were assigned to, you know, three other principals in the district. We had some focus groups that we did but that just wasn't, you know the best model. Then, I had a mentor that worked with me that the region set me up with and that worked a lot better because that was somebody who was there at the school on a weekly basis, a couple of times a week, you could really bounce ideas off of, so those things I think were very helpful.

She felt her college program for administration was valuable too. "I think the school

leadership program I did was good, as far as the coursework I did . . . so those things

about governance, culture and just day-to-day schooling, you use those a lot." Kim felt

her experience as an assistant principal was helpful as well.

> Your role as an AP kind of prepares you though for like the nuts and bolts running of a school because as an AP you do a lot of nuts and bolts stuff and you somewhat, you know, experiencing that curriculum and instructional role as well, but the assistant principalship will prepare you very well for the managerial pieces, at least mine did, the managerial pieces, and somewhat for the instructional pieces.

She described some of the issues that arose that she believed affected her lack of success

in the building when she was a principal.

> Some of the things I fought with as a principal that weren't as helpful as just getting support on some of the changes that needed to be made, particularly with

> my admin team, and I will say fought an assistant principal tooth and nail, my
> first year and had spent a lot of time undoing what that person was doing behind
> me, and that person did get moved.

She formed a committee and interviewed multiple candidates to fill the first assistant

principal opening; although their first-choice candidate was not approved, her second

choice was. The second assistant principal that remained at the school after her first year

also had issues and needed to be removed, but this never happened, even though she

made her supervisors aware of the issues and lack of ability to follow through on

essential administrator tasks.

> There is no doubt that Kim attributed one of the reasons for her short tenure as a

principal to not having a capable administrative team.

> When your assistant principals aren't effective, it puts a lot more on you so then I
> was having to carry a lot more of the, you know, of the day-to-day responsibilities
> of the school, which then cost me in some of the responsibilities I needed to be
> taking care of as principal.

Not having a highly effective school administrative team created the need for support

from her region.

> The biggest thing I needed was just support, and you know, I can deal with, you
> know, the pressures of testing and all of that, but just you know, support is key, I
> can't say that I always felt supported my entire time out there.

Most districts have monthly meetings that principals are required to attend. I asked her

about the helpfulness of these district-led professional development opportunities.

> It's like the meetings are dispensers of information that could be sent otherwise and that they, I don't feel like they did a lot to professionally develop me as a principal. I didn't learn how to do my job better in the district meeting—I learned whatever new thing or program they were gonna use for reading that year or if there was going to be a new walkthrough form . . . but I didn't learn anything that I felt like if I take this skill that they've taught me in this meeting and apply it to my professional role, that I would be a better principal.

In retrospect, Kim feels she accepted a position at a school that was not a good fit for her. She even began to push the school's test scores up before leaving, and she worked very hard to be successful.

> I put every inch of I had of me in the school I was at, and worked really hard at it and actually, believe it or not, you know, made a little headway there at the end, got a little bitty nudge in test scores, made expected growth for the first time in several years, so it took a lot to kind of, you know, turn it and start pushing it in a direction that I wanted to push it in, because it was a bear. I tell people all the time, I say, you know, had I been thinking the way I think now, then, I probably would have never taken Sunny Lane as my first school. I probably would have sat back and waited for something else because the challenges at Sunny Lane were great.

She spoke of extra reports she was asked to produce when her supervisor expressed concerns on the school's lack of progress. She was under more scrutiny on how she handled student/parent concerns compared to what her colleagues experienced. Overall, she felt the lack of support she received while at Sunny Lane affected her ability to be an effective leader. However, her final decision to leave came on her own. "No one had to force me away because I even came to the personal conclusion, just let me do something different."

She described what the stress was like at the end of her tenure as school leader.

>Sometimes, I would just wake up, I'm like I just, I could not, I was losing sleep, I was stressed, fretful. A lot of that was due to stress, the stress in the building, also stress and pressure from the district level that I was experiencing at the time, and by the time—it started that spring prior to my last year, the time March came around, I was—if they probably could have told me we have somewhere for you to go today, I probably would have went because I was extremely stressed so much so that as I was leaving Sunny Lane, I didn't even know if I was gonna stay in administration.

Kim talked about working with her district supervisors. "It was obvious that person wanted a change and I was fine with that, but we could have done that then instead of you know, bumping heads, locking horns, struggling for you know, two more years." She went on to explain more about the difficulty surrounding her departure. She felt her supervisor was just checking a box, not offering real support, when he asked her to complete certain documents and tasks.

>I tell people, I say I'm a big girl, I put my big girl britches on, and I can tell you there is some poo I stepped into, but there was just you know, some things it's just, it's kind of like the Gotcha game almost, you're checking a box, you're checking a list, and when we could have just had a discussion two years ago, say you know, I don't think you're gonna fit here, let's go ahead and cut ties here so we can make sure that we're able to, you know, go somewhere else.

She talked about the general stressors in the job of school principal.

>Oh, my career as a principal, fulfilling most of the time, stressful all of the time, to the point where I just really did not feel, at the tail end that I was moving in the direction that I needed to be moving in, that I was getting the job done that needed to be done. It was fulfilling in the sense of you know, working with the students, working with, you know, staff and parents. Stressful in the sense of just the normal stressors of principals, achievement, perception, the community perception, culture, those things, and trying to balance all of those things and keeping a happy medium and being able to continue to drive student achievement.

Kim explained how she had gone on to work as an assistant principal, at her own request, and she has worked at two different schools, both with stellar principals. She felt she had learned so much working alongside them that she could do the principalship again.

> I know I could do it, you know, given the opportunity again and these two years have just really allowed me the opportunity to reflect and add some tools to my tool belt that I know will, you know, will help me be successful . . . I feel very confident I could do it. One because I'm wiser now, I'm a whole lot wiser now, and two, I think you know, I'll know how to pick my opportunities better the next time to set myself and the school up in a situation where we could be successful together.

She also stated, "Probably the biggest thing you could give the principal is the opportunity to determine what their building level leadership will be." She gave more details on the importance of the leadership team.

> The fact that it's a team, and a team is almost like family. You have to have people who aren't necessarily like-minded but have a like vision and willing to work to drive that vision. For me it was, it—to me it was important because just to cut down on the conflict and animosity . . . It's a trust factor, being able to trust people, being able to have faith and confidence in your team.

She also felt the district could do more with supporting principals with instruction. "That's where the district could help principals as well as to give them tools to become better instructional leaders and cultural leaders in their building."

Principals Who Moved to Different Schools

Sue

Interviewee number three was Sue, a White female, who was a veteran educator and principal, spending all of her years in one district. She began her career in education

as a middle level educator for over a dozen years before becoming an instructional coach.

Her supervisors encouraged her to begin work toward an administrative degree and she

expressed her thoughts on how she looked at school leaders at that time.

> These people aren't gods, I think I could do this, you know, they have faults and strengths just like I do and a lot of the things that I was doing I think were advising principals on the teaching in the building and what was going on, and I realized that I had more insight in my skill level.

Once she began her classes toward certification, she was named as an assistant principal,

then shortly afterwards, to her first principalship. Sue shared, "I didn't get to pick, I

didn't interview," in discussing her first principalship. She relayed the story of how it

happened.

> While I was still an AP, I was out in the building walking and the treasurer called me on my walkie and she says Sue, Janie Williams from HR is on the phone for you. I thought, oh my goodness, what have I done, so I went down there and I— the night, the day before she had asked me for my resume and she told me she had asked for my resume because they were putting my resume before that board that night to name me as a principal to be determined. I said well, do I need to go to the board and she was like no, no, we're just gonna submit your name and if you get approved we're gonna let you know where you're going, so I waited a couple of weeks and that's when she—I saw her at like the transfer fair or whatever it was, and I said well, you figured out where I'm going yet and she says, you don't trust me, I said sure I trust you, and she said she'd let me know pretty soon. Sure enough, they said they were sending me to Middletown Elementary. I had no idea where Middletown was, and that's how it happened.

Her promotion into administration came quickly and she was not licensed when she

became a principal, finishing her degree about six months into the job.

When she began that first principalship she felt like she had a school that lacked

organization and a lack of good relationships among the teachers and administrator. "I

felt like I had to take that school like a salt shaker and turn it upside down and dump

everything out and then look at each piece and put it back together, and that took me

about two years." The previous school leader had wanted to control everything and

teachers were not trusted, with the former principal described almost like a bully, keeping

a tight grip on everyone. Sue's style of leadership was quite different. "I think the

principalship is, in order to be successful in the principalship, you have to know people

and build relationships with people first and foremost. I think that is more important than

anything you can learn in a book." Therefore, she began with intentional relationship

building and promoting a culture of trust in the building, even though she still had to

make tough decisions to remove ineffective staff.

> I like being a servant leader that sometimes, you know, I have to put on my big girl panties and make those kinds of decisions and have those critical conversations with people and I don't enjoy it, I've become better at it, but I don't—I still don't enjoy that part of it. I'd rather help people you know.

She talked about supports she received that assisted her in being successful including a

supportive office and teaching staff.

> My office staff, I think through the relationships that you build with them, we become a team and I feel like they have my back, that they love me, that they worry about me, because I'm here all the time and my health and the stress and all of that and so, you know, they're very willing to help, step in and help if I need it or that kind of thing so that's what strengthens me here, is the staff and just what, the good working relationship that we have together.

Sue also gave credit to her direct supervisor for helping her and supporting her in her role

of principal.

He was real—he is the only supervisor I have ever had that when I said to them what do you see, what am I doing well, and what do you want me to work on, he would give me something to work on . . . I think being under him made me a better principal and I loved, I loved learning from all of the years, I didn't agree with everything he said, but I respected him, I loved him as my supervisor. I feel like he cared, genuinely cared about your success, and I enjoyed gleaning from all those years of experience that he had, things that he's learned . . . so I felt like he was a good mentor for me, and I respected him and really looked forward to the conversations that we had and he taught me a lot.

One thing that stood out from her first principalship was having demanding parents. "You felt like a lot of times that no matter what you did, they would pick apart." Sue shared they had exerted pressure on the previous leader to leave the school and that affected her confidence. ". . . I always wondered when it was gonna be my turn." Sue shared more about the pressure coming from the parental community.

They were very quick to call the regional office, very quick to call the school board members. They used to tell, threat—they would threaten you if they didn't get their way and say that they had the superintendent on speed dial . . . The sad thing is I felt like I was always trying to please the parents instead of focusing on student achievement like I should have been. Now granted, we did make great gains, so obviously we made, we did make end roads there, but that pressure was always in the back of my mind, what am I gonna do that's gonna make them angry, that's gonna turn the tide and then they're gonna start running me out.

However, the possible parental backlash never materialized during her tenure at the school.

Sue shared about other stressors, "I think school budgets are very hard for all of us . . . we get low on even custodial supplies, toilet paper, soap, paper towels, had to borrow those from other schools and vice versa." Being in a medium-sized elementary school, she did not have an assistant principal so monitoring the school was an issue. "It's

very frustrating to not have administrative support in a building and you're gone all day

and things happen and nobody can really help you." The last major stressor she

mentioned dealt with poor district communication among departments.

> I wish that the district office was more cohesive in the directives that they give to principals because I feel often that one department is not talking to the other department, they're not communicating amongst all the departments there, and so one will issue information and then the other. For example, my CF told me just the other day, they have called a CF meeting for October eighth and that's the day we're giving the CogAT, and she's our only test administrator, so she has to be in the building. So, it's almost like did you guys not talk to the testing department to find out that the CogAT's being given to all third graders in the state that day? So those types of things are very frustrating sometimes.

She discussed her thoughts about staying or leaving that first school she was assigned.

> Once I got it running really, really well it became, it becomes like your baby and you, you put so much hard work into a place that you, it's hard to let it go . . . but at five or six years, I started to get itchy feet, because I like the challenge of something to fix and work on and make better.

She explained how she had been driving almost an hour each way to get to this school. "I

wanted to get closer to home and wanted a different challenge, so the opportunity came

up here and I decided to, you know, put my name in the hat for it." After almost seven

years, she left her first principalship and began her second at the same level but across

town.

> I like being a lot closer to home, it has allowed my family to be around my school life more, which has been really nice, they'll come up here and help, like we had the holiday breakfast or things like that, and they'll come up here and volunteer, so that's been a real nice thing.

Sue was in her third year in the second principalship at the time of our interview. She

shared that this school was in much better shape than her first school was when she

arrived, but still had issues to be addressed. "I feel like the staff here, is the, I will say,

hands down, the best staff I have ever worked with, ever, in all the schools, as a teacher,

as an instructional coach, and administrator." Sue felt this would be the school she would

retire from, probably within a couple years, as she would be at full retirement with ten of

those years as an administrator. She spoke briefly about her plans after retirement.

> I'm ready to do something different and I'm ready to do something where I don't
> have to boss people. I want to go in and work and contribute and help, but I don't
> want to have to always be the one that's running everything.

Eric

Interviewee number four, Eric, a veteran White male principal, worked at multiple

levels of school leadership totaling over twenty years in education. He began his career in

the classroom and admitted, "I knew early on that I wanted to be in administration." He

worked under a strong principal where the school was doing good things and moving

forward. However, when that principal moved on to another larger school, his

replacement ". . . who was far less effective in my opinion and in most opinions . . ." got

Eric thinking about administration again. "I could do this so much better than this person,

and so I just sort of, I thought well, I'm gonna enroll in a class and see if I like it." He did

enjoy the class and finished his MSA degree, served a year as an assistant principal and

then moved on to his first principalship.

Eric had an interesting story about how he started at his first school.

> I will never forget the first day on the job. I drove up in front of the school, parked my car, and got out and walked toward the school. As I was about to walk through the door I heard a bus coming into the parking lot and I thought oh, I wonder what that bus is doing here, so I walk inside and I ask the secretary, reintroduced myself, how are you doing kind of thing, and I said why is that bus out there, and she said oh, today is the first day of summer school, and I said oh, good deal, who's in charge of that, and she said well, you are. No warning, no anything. Fortunately, the curriculum facilitator was there and had already made some plans for summer school . . . I did not see my supervisor until right before school started in August, so I was there on the ground, six or seven weeks with no contact with them.

He discussed how that first school leadership position afforded him the opportunity to be an instructional leader.

> I took over a school that was in a really good place, you know, the principal had been strong, they had had a lot of focus on instruction, things were going well, so I went in sort of maintaining, which is really good because it gave me an opportunity to learn how to be a principal without having to also figure out how to get test scores up and all that, so that was a good experience for me.

He shared ways in which the district attempted to offer support.

> I finally did get assigned a mentor, who was great. If I needed her, I reached out to her. She always answered my questions. She was always available to me. We never had any planned time together. We never had any opportunity that was set aside for us to just kind of brainstorm. I don't recall her ever visiting my school.

Eric mentioned it would have been helpful to have a supportive mentor. "Sure would have been nice to have had a 15-year veteran in there who could really have you know, guide and direct, but—so I think that some scheduled planned time would have been really nice." He also felt it would have been a positive to ". . . have a scheduled time with

someone who was not affiliated with our district." Another support the district provided

were new principal meetings.

> I seem to recall that we had these new principal meetings once a month . . . it was a very supportive environment, the person in charge of that whole thing was very friendly and caring, but there was not any real, I don't know that there was any real substance during most of those meetings.

When questioned on whether there were any particular difficulties in his first school

leadership position, he shared, "First of all, my first two years at that school I had three

supervisors. And that was a little challenging, obviously, because you have to learn to

adjust to the different demands." Since everything was new to him, he mentioned putting

in long hours to make things work at his first school.

> I wanted to do it right so I had to do, a lot of figuring it out, so a lot of that figuring it out I did, you know, sitting at my desk in my office at seven, eight, nine o'clock in the evening.

I found it interesting that even though he spoke of taking over a strong school, which

mostly needed maintaining, he still worked very long hours. However, he knew this first

school did not provide a major challenge for him professionally. "I was very happy at that

school. I did feel by the end of my second year, I did feel like I was not being challenged

as much as I could be maybe, or should be." Eric remained for a couple of years before

he was asked to move to another larger school by the superintendent, by way of an

unexpected phone call.

> The call came on the last work—the day before the last workday at the end of my second year and the superintendent said so I'm calling you to let you know that I

need you to go out to this middle school and I said, my first response was oh no, I didn't apply for that, you know, and he said no, I know you didn't apply for it, I'm calling to let you know that I need you to go out there and take it and I, you know, blah-blah-blah, and he's kind of talking through and I said oh no, no, no, no, really, I'm good, and he said, I will never forget, he said I'm not asking you, he said, I'm calling to let you know that you're being moved to this school and I said oh, well that is different, okay, so what would you like for me to do now, and he said, again, something I will never forget, he said, well tomorrow is the last work day, you'll need to tell your staff tomorrow morning.

Eric admitted the next school was quite different from his first one.

It was not quite as much of a well-oiled machine as the other school had been. Fortunately, I had figured out how to be a principal at that point and so then my focus became on, became getting that school to where it needed to be.

He spoke about having a highly effective supervisor who provided needed support in a school that required a lot of attention.

She was hugely supportive, in my opinion, she had, you know, she met with me before I went out there, she talked about the needs of the school, she asked me what supports I needed, I was provided with those, like for example, that school had two assistant principals and no ISS coordinator, and I said I'm gonna need three and an ISS coordinator, so she made that happen . . . As the year progressed, I found that everything the IIO was doing was very—meaningful. If she pulled us out of our building for a meeting, I felt like it was worthwhile. She actually spent time in my building and knew what was going on there. She was there only my first year, and then—or maybe two and then she retired.

Once again, Eric identified the turnover in direct supervisors as one of the difficulties in this second principalship. "I ended up with four others in my time there, so five over seven years . . . no one felt invested after that first one retired." He spoke further about why the supervisors did not seem connected to him or the school. "Some of them were, it felt to me anyway like some of them were just kind of there to see what kind of

quick impact they could make and then move on." After seven years, he felt ". . . like I had taken the school as far as I could take it and it was probably time for someone else to come in and with a different skillset and take it to the next level." Eric began looking at other opportunities, wanting to be a school leader at all three levels. In addition, he mentioned, "Part of it frankly, was my supervisor."

> I just felt like she was completely clueless about what went on in the school, so when I went to speak with her about something or contacted her about something I felt like I was, I felt like I was whining, you know, like I'm caught, like I'm saying but poor me, I need this, and I need that, and if she had known what was going on in my building I think she would have said you're absolutely right, you do need that, or let's think about this a different way, I'm not sure we can make that happen kind of thing or what's a compromise, but it was just more of a, just a complete disconnect.

When prompted for what he really needed from a supervisor, in order to feel supported in the principal role, Eric shared his thoughts.

> But I think that if you have someone who's knowledgeable, someone who is able to provide you with the support you need and someone who listens, and I think it can be very powerful, I mean what I need from a supervisor is when I come to you and say here's an issue I'm dealing with in my school and here's what I think the solution is, but I need you to help me find that solution, whether it be through financial resources or human resources, or whatever, I—that's what I need from a supervisor at this point in my career.

While we were discussing issues that influence principals to stay in their schools and/or positions, or to leave, the topic of salary surfaced.

> Some people talk about pay and I don't think it's about pay. You know, for example, I could probably go to a neighboring district and make more than I make now, I feel fairly certain that I could, but it's not about that. It's about, it's about feeling connected to a place and feeling like you're making a difference and

feeling like you're being respected, which I think is important and you know, I do think that you get a little more of that in smaller districts than you do in larger districts.

Eric moved on to the third level of schooling and had held that position five years at the time of our interview, totaling 14 years as principal.

Edith

Interviewee number five was a veteran, White female administrator, nearing the end of her career in education. Edith started as an elementary educator, later becoming an elementary counselor. After staying out a few years with her own children, she returned to teaching and then to administration. She shared a little about her move from teacher to administrator and the influence of one principal that inspired her in getting an advanced degree.

Actually, it was one of my elementary principals; she just really pushed and encouraged me to go do it. I had not thought about it before that. I just valued her opinion that if she told me to do it, I was gonna go do it. I truly admired everything she did.

She served at three different elementary schools as principal before moving to a middle school at mid-year. She described her years at elementary and some supports she received, which ranged from informal advice from a school secretary, to a quality principal mentor from another elementary school. "There was no assistant principal, there was no curriculum facilitator, none of those things were there at all." Therefore, she was dependent on gaining advice from those in her building or from a district assigned mentor, a more seasoned principal.

At the second elementary school, ". . . I had a series of bosses, so to speak, they were going through a lot of change and turnover then." During her career as an administrator, Edith worked under three different superintendents and each led with a differing chain of command. At one highly impacted school, she admitted having no boss as the superintendent had given her free reign to make her own decisions, regardless of district initiatives.

> I didn't have a boss really, they told everybody to just, go away, to leave her alone, you know, because I didn't follow the policy, I mean he knew I was not, but that was when they were doing that reading, three blocks and a ball, Literacy First, or something like that and he pretty much just said, you know, go make it work, so I was most appreciative.

The district she worked in set the expectation that all schools would follow the same curriculum, therefore having the superintendent allow her to move forward with her own ideas was unusual.

> I liked it at first, I really did, but when it came close to EOG time I panicked, I truly panicked because I thought what the hell have you done, because if this thing goes south it's you, you know, it's just you and you know, you got nothing, you got nothing to hang your hat on and I really did panic. I truly went through a few nights that I thought you must have lost your mind.

She was unsure if her own philosophy would yield positive results and she knew the superintendent expected big things from her. That year her instructional leadership in the school yielded good results and her school was one of the most improved, not only in the district, but also in the state.

Edith shared that most moves she made between elementary schools were due to the influence of her superintendents. Usually, she would get a phone call telling her she was needed at another school. She spoke about the supports she received during her years of administration at the elementary level.

> I do believe for the young principal, and I was young at that time, not necessarily in years, but in experience, what they did do then that was very helpful to me is we had a very strong principal mentor, and they've stopped that now. She was good and I trusted her. I mean it really was because it was somebody to call. You know, she had, we had the relationship that if I called her, she took the call. If they had to go find her out in the building, she took the call, and I wish they would go back to doing that.

She spoke about her general experience as a school leader in elementary and how she felt like she was supported.

> I'll be honest with you, I really enjoyed my elementary years, I thought they were great, you know, I felt like I had support at that time of course these were years ago, but I felt like I really had the support and I enjoyed what I was doing. I mean there's always stress with the job and you're always worried when people don't like what you're doing and you always look at the numbers whether it's scores or teachers coming in and out or, you know, you always feel like you're a product of numbers, but overall, you know, I was pretty happy.

Edith received a phone call from the superintendent about moving to the middle school level, but she shared how her tenure at the middle school only lasted for one year. She got additional instructions from the superintendent that she would be moving to a high school across town at the end of that year. Thus, he had her working at both schools for several months and she remarked, "I did not feel very effective at either place." She added, "It was a very disjointed time for me because I mean if you hadn't been there but

a year and you're already know you're going someplace else, you're a lame duck, you

know, you're a lame duck principal. He had me going back and forth between the two

schools for about four months."

The move from a short stint in middle school to a large high school was

challenging for her. "It was a bear to manage, it was like . . . going from a row boat to a

battleship." When asked if the high school leadership position brought on more stress,

"Oh, ten times more, huge." She spoke some about the time required to do the job.

> This job requires the principal to run a minimum of a 60-hour work week every
> week, not some weeks, every single week, and if a high school principal tells you
> they're not running a 60-hour week, they either need to come and teach me how
> to do it better or they're, you know, they're not doing it, you know, as the job is
> just that demanding. Nobody wants to put in a 60-hour week, you know, nobody
> wants to.

She shared the differences she noticed in coming from an elementary/middle school

background to the high school level and these were obvious stressors for Edith.

> I didn't understand athletics and the complexity of athletics and the budget . . . the
> budget, you know was like going from an apartment to a you know, a 20-room
> home. I didn't understand AP or IB and how all that worked and I didn't
> understand scheduling in high school courses and I mean there was just so much I
> did not understand.

Edith discussed having a boss that was supportive and was a great help to her.

> I had Doug Smith as a boss, which was a very saving grace for me, and he was
> immensely supportive despite my lack of experience. We had a great relationship
> and I called him at night and he would answer, unlike now, you know, I call, if
> you call anybody after four o'clock, you're not gonna get an answer and if you try
> on a weekend, which I do on Friday nights, you are, you won't get a call until
> Monday, but he was very available to me.

Edith stayed several years at that first high school and it was not long until they too were

achieving at high levels in multiple areas: academically with test scores rising, graduation

rates improving, teachers making high growth and the community rallying around the

school. She was pleased with the progress, but once again was directed to another school.

She shared a little about this last move and told about receiving a phone call from

someone high up in the district, but not the superintendent, inquiring about her interest in

a move to a high school across town.

> I said I, no, you know, things are running well, it has taken a long time, you
> know, because it's just such a big boat, so to speak . . . it's all good, it's all good,
> and she said okay and then that was the end of it, you know, it was the end of it.

However, Edith said only a few weeks passed before another call came in to let her know

the move was going to occur at the end of the year. Edith knew she had no control over

their decision to move her once again and she began to prepare herself mentally for the

next challenge.

> I always came in, I call it with my marching orders, I always had a set of
> marching orders, so everything you did from the time you hit there was geared
> towards making that superintendent happy and fulfilling what they asked you to
> go do.

Since Edith was given specific directives at her school, we discussed whether she

received much feedback from the district leaders once her principalship began.

> It's like once I was put there and told what to do, well I'm off that plate, now
> they're moved—that superintendent moved on to the next problem, issue,
> circumstance, whatever that was, I'm off, that's done, you know, and there wasn't
> that support, no.

When prompted about why she had never looked into central office positions, she shared

some of her thoughts.

> If we were really truthful, there's not an enormous amount of respect for a lot of
> folks that are in central office, and I didn't want to be one of those people. I didn't
> want to be one of those people that came out to your school or this school or any
> other school saying crap out of my mouth that wasn't true and I knew you knew it
> wasn't true and yet I've got to say it anyway, you know, I just didn't want to do
> that.

At the time of our interview, Edith was still working at the high school that she had been

directed to lead.

Michael

Interviewee number six was a veteran, African American male principal named

Michael. Having some relatives who were educators, he began to think about being a

teacher from an early age. He started by teaching high school for a decade and he was

complimentary of the high school he worked in for those ten years.

> Daleville High School was a great place to learn, to develop, and especially as a
> young teacher. At the time, Daleville was a school where there was little turnover
> and there were so many veteran teachers, so I got an opportunity to really learn
> from some of, some really great educators.

Michael went on to obtain a Master's in School Administration, but he was unable

to complete his internship before the district placed him into an assistant principal

position. He remained there less than a year before being named as a principal at the

elementary level.

> I was very fortunate, Birchwood Elementary was a well-oiled machine, that could run itself . . . I really sharpened my diplomatic skills because I had parents who thought Birchwood was a private public school, and so they wanted to dictate whose child, whose teacher a child had, and what hallway, and if the teacher owned a cat, they didn't want the child to be in the classroom, so most of my days were dealing with non-instructional issues.

He had a veteran staff to lead at a high performing elementary school and he had less than a year of experience at this level. He thought there were challenges, even in this first principalship. "How do I lead teachers who have been there 20, 25 years, and talk about how do we grow the gifted and talented students even more?" He knew he was a green principal and he shared, "I didn't have, you know, again, the experience, the know how to articulate that to that staff." However, he admitted, "There was a lot of the rigor in terms of, you know, making sure that teachers were challenging students like they should be." He also shared about the challenges of his parental culture and the exceptional children's population.

> Our parents at Birchwood were highly educated in the educational process with regards to students with disabilities, and we really had to make sure that we were on it. The EC population, parents really demanding the testing and the IST process and making sure that we followed it rightfully so, the IEPs to the book, and if not I was in a lot of meetings with my EC teachers, whether it be IEPs, 504s, making sure that we were dotting our i's and crossing our t's.

He mentioned that the district personnel did not come out often to visit him and he was not micromanaged.

> Michael shared about the things that he felt supported him as a new principal.

> New principals, we had meetings, it was like a cohort that we met, I don't want to say it was like quarterly, and then we had our—at the time, we had, well we

weren't in regions, we had the IIO, and my IIO was outstanding, highly respected, I mean just really on top of just like everything. I used to wonder, wonder, you know, when does she sleep? She was always sending emails out, and so she was always a phone call away if something came about.

After two years, he was directed to move to another school, a middle school, by a phone call from the superintendent.

It was a Dr. Highsmith phone call, it was a Highsmith phone call, and he told me that he needed me, you know, I had just finally, I think, gotten the elementary curriculum under my belt and I could speak to it and I could really have those conversations and now I'm getting a call about going.

It was a small highly impacted middle school, that had many needs and he was hesitant about his ability to turn it around. This move would be a complete change from the culture, staff and students at his previous school.

It was a school in turmoil, and I was afraid to, did I have a choice, yes, but the writing was, I mean it was—the writing was on the wall it was, you know, it was a pretty much unspoken demand so to speak . . . so, I said let's do a walkthrough and I took my tie off and I went up there one day before they even announced that I was going, and it was like a stereotypical movie scene that you see where schools are like in large cities that are just people everywhere. The fire alarm was going off, kids were in the hallways running, I mean it was just, I was like oh my God, you know, what, and so, I did a lot of soul searching, a lot of praying, you know, and I just said hey, you know, you can't go, you can't go backwards at this point.

With support from his district Instructional Improvement Officer, who had some middle school experience, he began working on the culture, routines and norms in the school. "She held my hand that summer and we also had to hire like 25 teachers that summer." Michael helped them form a leadership team, named department chairs,

worked on student expectations and discipline too, but this took him out of being the

instructional leader. Scores went backwards before climbing up in years two and three.

By the second year, he was given academic coaches and the support of another

instructional improvement officer who also had experience in middle school.

> There were days when he would come over and he'd bring his lunch and put it in my refrigerator, he was there all day, but it wasn't threatening, it was, it was, you know, 'While I am here, I'm here to help, you know, support you.' He'd go to a PLC or he'd go do a walkthrough or you know, he'd go and listen to a teacher's gripe you know, about the demands and the accountability.

Michael had assistant principals with middle school experience as well and all the

support—new teachers, academic coaches, a strong administrative team, supportive

leaders—to help them make growth. "We were busting our behinds, I mean every day,

trying to not only motivate the students but motivate the teachers, support teachers." He

knew the hard work of all stakeholders would make a difference.

He specifically spoke about the support that all the new teachers needed and how

he used his role in assisting them.

> Just think about the analogy of basketball. If I sit back and just watch you shoot a free throw and just keep knowing your mechanics are wrong, and you keep missing and I don't do anything but say hey, you can do it, you can do it, that's not helping you. Let me get in there and show you the form, the, you know, how to bend your knees, you know, that's what we're trying to do.

With the assistance of quality assistant principals, effective coaches and a supervisor who

gave him lots of support, teachers became more effective and student achievement

increased. "We did it. I was happy with the turnaround. I learned a lot."

Michael also discussed some of the challenges he faced in being a school

principal including answering late night alarm calls.

> I've never had a school, knock on wood, where every weekend, at least once a
> week, the alarm was going off, the windows being, the cafeteria windows broken,
> or graffiti. There were times when I, you know, police were telling me you want
> me to meet you, I said yes, I'm not going, you know, it's two in the morning, I'm
> not going over there looking at that building by myself.

Those three years at a highly impacted middle school required lots of effort but

were rewarding for Michael. However, his background in teaching was high school, and

when a move to an impacted high school was proposed to him, he had to consider it.

> I think it was timing, you know, I don't know, we—had been there three years, I
> knew I wasn't going to retire there, and when I say timing, it was great, I mean we
> made AYP, we were, we were rolling, and so I always tell, you know, if you can,
> you know, always, you want to leave a place better than what it was when you got
> there.

Michael went on to work at two high schools in the next seven years. He

experienced highs and lows as he directed that first high school through a turnaround

process, interviewing dozens of teachers and rehiring almost half of the original staff.

> We had tremendous support, we had HR, everybody that was directors of every
> department in the district was there, interviewing, screening, you know, we had
> like, we would have like eight interviews going on at one time.

The school went on to meeting growth goals for 80% of the time he was there.

A call came in from the superintendent about another high school and after

multiple phone conversations, he moved once again to another high school. "I've always

got, I've always had a lump in my throat when I tell my staff goodbye." When prodded

more about the decision to move from one high school to another, Michael shared,

> I told myself, I said hey, you know I wasn't looking for it, I wasn't, I wasn't
> looking for a change you know, we've still got work to do, and you know, it's
> almost like you're letting your family down to a certain extent.

However, he told one school staff goodbye and said hello to a new staff. He had the

summer to get acclimated to the new building and staff. "I met with the staff that

summer, informal meetings, I had two, I said all I want to know is two questions, what's

working, what's not." He knew he was taking over a school this time that had

experienced some success and they had foundational things in place, but he knew he

needed to keep it moving forward. He felt the current staff would be able to articulate the

strengths and challenges of the school.

One of the schools in which he led was a smaller traditional high school, which

previously had a declining enrollment. "That was a huge challenge, because I, you know,

obviously as you know, the enrollment affects your allotment." He felt a constant

pressure to keep the enrollment numbers up, so he had to work closely with the

community and families to showcase the positives of his school. He also said that at the

first high school, "I just came in like I'm the new sheriff in town, this is what we're

gonna do." He did not have time to sit down and talk with them about their own goals

and how they aligned with the school's vision. He learned the importance of taking time

to get to know the staff, and their concerns, before jumping in with his own ideas.

Michael had been in education for over 20 years, and when questioned about his

desire to remain as a principal or to move on to a central office position, he felt he could

continue in the role until retirement.

> Lord willing, my health stays well, I'm, able to be mobile, be visible, if you, as a
> principal, if you can't, if you're not visible, if those things besides the
> instructional stuff, it's sort of tough, so that's why I say as long as my health
> allows me.

Since Michael had spent multiple years leading different types of schools, I asked him

about why he has chosen to remain a principal, although he worked in a variety of places,

and how he has been successful at each setting. "I knew that central office wasn't where I

wanted to be, for some weird way I still wanted to see kids in the hallway, I still wanted

to say hey, come here, stop being silly, you know, so I didn't apply." He went on to talk

about the fulfillment of having success in school leadership and how others can gauge

their success.

> Let the work speak, let the work speak for you. It'll come, and if it's meant to be
> it's gonna happen, and I'm not bragging I, you know, I've been honored in that,
> you know . . . so I just let the work speak, and then, you know, again, if the
> work's there and you do what needs to be done and with due diligence, you will—
> those goals will come . . . I think the work or the action, so to speak, as they say,
> speaks louder than words.

Michael did not mention any specific supports he desired but did not receive. It seemed

he highly regarded most of his supervisors and he was able to receive the supports that

were needed at the multiple sites he led.

Principals Who Stayed in One School

Cindy

The seventh interviewee was a middle-aged, White female administrator named Cindy, who had also been in the principalship for less than four years. Although she originally considered engineering as a college major, she moved toward teaching and stated, ". . . as soon as I took my first education class, I was like oh, I'm home, this is exactly what I want to do." She went on to describe why working in middle school was a motivation for her.

> I knew I always wanted to teach middle school because that's where I felt I hadn't you know, I was not a bad kid but I had, you know, messed up, didn't make the grades I wanted to make, found myself calling my grandparents to come pick me up more because I just didn't want to be at school, and knew that if I could have maybe straightened out a little bit more in middle school it would have been easier for me in high school, so I just knew how important that time was.

She shared, "I loved being in the classroom and I loved being a teacher, but pretty early in my career I started having opportunities to go to workshops and present to teachers." Later, she became an academic coach for her district, but it took her away from consistent work in schools. She knew she still liked working with teachers, so she decided to get her MSA, become an administrator and continue her work with teachers. She became an assistant principal for several years before assuming her first principalship role of which she was still in at the time of our interview.

She spoke about how her experiences as an assistant principal helped her to be a better leader with her first school since her principal had acted as a mentor.

. . . he also never let us fail, if he would see any of the AP's, if he would see that we were about to really make a mistake he would come in and correct it or he would say I'm gonna let you go, but I want you to watch what happens.

Cindy shared the differences she saw in being a teacher, curriculum leader, assistant principal and principal.

I don't think I went into being an AP and struggled with the development of an AP as much as I struggled with the development of a principal, that's been more similar to that of a new teacher than an AP was, because the jump from teacher to kind of that kind of curriculum coach to AP, was very, very fluid for me, but moving into the principalship was as difficult as it was my first couple years teaching, of trying to get my own feet underneath me, to figure out what, how to step and where to avoid land mines.

She talked about one of the stressors she felt in the principalship that dealt with a district expectation of a written safety plan.

Right now, what is in my mind is the school safety plans and all of that piece, filling out a checklist, a comprehensive checklist is one thing, but I just don't know if I even have the background, if we had a tragedy at our school, if we had a fire that did damage or a tornado came through or whatever the unforeseen thing is, I don't know that what was done on that plan is enough to make it work, so I think that accountability, it's nice that it's done so the district can say, look, all of our schools have these safety plans and these reunification plans and all this done, I think that it's unrealistic to say that it would then go smoothly.

Therefore, even though she and many other principals completed a comprehensive safety plan on a district or possibly even a state mandated template, she did not have confidence that the plan would work in reality. She shared about directives she had to comply with even though she did not always agree.

I think things that get on my nerves is when there are pieces that come down from the district that I do not feel is best for me, my students, or the teachers, in terms of what's right for education. And trying to balance that, and it comes in different ways, whether it's the math criteria that's coming down, whether it's how we handle something with transportation, a budget issue, I think if I had control and could make the decision, good or bad, when right or wrong, I would be responsible for it, but I don't always feel like I can make a decision of what I think is best.

When questioned about supports from her supervisors thus far in her principalship, she shared,

And our supervisors don't back us up, I mean they support us, but they're not there to tell you, yes you need to do that, or no you're not to do that until it's—until you've done the wrong thing, until after the fact, and so when they say the buck stops here, my mentor would say it as you're the one in the big chair and so it was a definite different feel . . . I think we just have some of the wrong people in district leadership in our district that's causing it to be more problematic than it really could be or should be.

She also shared about some of her training through her MSA program and the pieces that stood out the most to her as being helpful.

I really think they did a good job of preparing us, like we would have to do all these scenarios, okay, you come in, and these are the six things that you're greeted with at the front office, and we're sitting there like this is never going to happen, and those scenarios now are benign versus what we really do, and they knew that, so that was very helpful.

When we talked about the supports she wished she had as a new school principal, she began by sharing some simple things.

I think there were some real supports that even now I think would have been nice. If somebody had told me my first year that we had to do a fire drill the first week of school when I first started, nobody had told me that, so I missed that, or some

> very practical things as a new principal, you had some training of okay here's how you gotta run your budget and this is how you do some of the things and this is how you do these HR pieces, but even like these are the forms you need to send out on the first week of school . . . so there's all these things that I don't necessarily think about ahead of time.

Other than the nuts-and-bolts type of direction she sought, she also mentioned having more time with colleagues in a setting that is open and respected by the leaders of the district.

> Then obviously, time to talk with each other about what's going on in a nonthreatening environment, because I don't think—I'm not always comfortable when we're in some of our leveled meetings with our supervisor there to say I don't agree with this or this is not what I want to do, because I just don't feel like it's–it's listened to and we move on.

Her last request came at the prompting of what supports you would request if not limited by resources or local policy.

> I would ask for Sean Williams, a consultant who has done a lot of training with the principals of highly impacted schools, to come and spend time with me for three days in a row going into classrooms and helping me coach some of the teachers. Not somebody from the district. Because he has not associated with the games and the politics. I am keenly aware of all the games and the politics, nor does he have the ego.

Cindy wants to remain at her current school as a principal for a minimum of five years, maybe a few more. She even mentioned an additional reason she might stay for five years or more. "Part of that is because of a financial, like I can cash out that five-year bonus at the end of five years, so I hate to leave that money on the table, and that's real."

However, she does not feel like she receives the type of feedback from her supervisors that indicate if it is possible.

> When she comes into the building to look at something, she's looking for specific checklist items, the EQ, the Word Wall, the I Can statements posted on the walls, which really isn't at the heart of whether this is being a successful lesson or not. And I think the district, for whatever reason, because they have so much to do, but it's all coming from the place that they want to make things effective, they reduce everything to a checklist, and that's not really helpful . . . and so that is why I'm leery of support from the district when they come in.

She is not confident in their perception of her abilities.

> . . . because I always feel like I'm on the edge of crashing and burning, like at the end of this year they're gonna say, you know, Cindy, I think it's time you go back because the scores are not good, you're not making the progress I want to make, you're not being, your kids are not growing.

As the researcher, I found it intriguing that this new principal did not have more confidence in her work as an administrator because she appears to be doing a great job and is well respected among her colleagues.

Denise

Interviewee number eight was a veteran, White female principal named Denise, with almost nine years in the principal role, all at the same school. Denise explained that she had always wanted to teach, from lining up her dolls for lessons, to listening to students read while in junior high school.

> I was a pretty good student and I didn't always need study hall to catch up or do what I needed to do and it was kind of boring and there were some teachers in the elementary school who would want to get help so sometimes they would ask for helpers to come down and read with their elementary kids, and I thought that was

the best thing that ever happened, to be able to go down to a first grade classroom and sit in the hall and listen to the kids read, and that's when I kind of fell in love with, for sure, with wanting to teach.

She worked in several elementary schools teaching multiple grade levels and doing some work as a Title I reading teacher too, but at that time, she could not imagine working in administration.

Never really thought I wanted to be an administrator because, I, from my point of view, they did all the stuff I disliked. They dealt with the discipline issues, they dealt with angry parents, but it's the part I liked the least about my job, so I never imagined I would ever want to do anything in administration, but probably somewhere along ten, twelve years, right in there, I really started getting really itchy to see what else can I do.

As her desire to do something different grew, her family was growing too and finances were tight. She pursued her MSA degree through the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program where giving four years back to the state would equate to a free education. She expounded on her motivations to teach and to go into administration.

I almost felt like I was motivated to become a teacher because of all the great teachers and I was motivated maybe a little bit, or given confidence, that I could be an administrator because I think I was surrounded by some poor decision-making. I won't say they were incompetent, but some poor decision-making and maybe just didn't always treat people well, you know, with how things were rolled out or the way people reacted with staff, so I think that motivated me to become a principal.

However, she also began to see the positives that a school leadership position could hold.

The more you start to think about how the, you can have a positive impact upon kids and teachers then, you know, then you feel, oh, well this is, that would be great because I'm impacting this many people in the classroom but look what I

can do positively, yes I'm gonna have some of those negative things to deal with but look at all the things you could do and decision you could make and get more input before you decide how everything is gonna be done.

After completing her yearlong internship as a Principal Fellow, she worked as an assistant principal at two different middle schools in two districts. In her first assistant principalship she worked for a veteran principal with lots of experience at highly impacted schools. She shared some things she learned from her that were supportive in learning about leadership.

> One thing I loved about her because it was a very, very highly impacted school that I hope I never forget was she cared about how that school looked, she cared about how it looked to her own students, she cared about it being clean and neat, because for the really highly impacted population who, a lot of them had some really, pretty dire home situations, she wanted them to come to school and be in a place that was really organized and was place of order and that they could feel safe.

After she was offered her second AP position, the following day, the principal of the school was on the front page of the paper being moved to a high school across town. "That made me really nervous because you know I think it's important to connect, and that you believe in each other and you can trust each other and that kind of thing." However, once the district named a new principal, the two connected and made a great team. She remained in that position for over three years, before being named to principal at that same school.

Denise felt the transition from assistant principal to principal went smoothly, partly due to taking the position at mid-year.

> There's not a lot of decision-making really that had to go on and not really a whole lot that needed to be changed . . . I wasn't getting to know a new population of kids or community or teachers. They were all happy. I don't necessarily think it was because they thought I was gonna be spectacular, but it's the fear of the unknown that really bothers staff sometimes, and I was at least a known factor.

The school community had a reason to fear the unknown and deal with constant change. When Denise began at Milford Middle School as an AP, her principal was the fifth one named in five years. The community wanted stability in their leadership.

Within the next couple of years, she began to lead with her own style and made some changes in procedures and the way things were done. As this happened, Denise explained how some staff members struggled with the changes with comments like, "She's changed, she's not the person she used to be, she's different." However, Denise commented, "It was just I had not had an opportunity to assert myself as the leader and maybe ask for some different things." She admitted,

> . . . there were pros and cons to being a principal at a school where you've been an assistant principal. For me at that time, I really believe there were more pros than cons . . . I knew what the routines were there at that school. I sort of knew what was working and not working for those teachers and those kids.

The district experienced a change in superintendents during her first few years in the principalship. The new district leader was making his rounds to all the schools and informally talking to school leaders. Denise shared that conversation and how it affected her longer tenure at the same school.

> When the superintendent came, I remember him coming out to the school and me saying, 'I want to be here for a little while, I'm just now beginning to get the trust

of the community and I feel like I'm just beginning to be effective, and I really like being here, and I want to be here for a while'. I think he had the exact opposite mentality as the former superintendent, not to just move people to be moving people.

She shared details about some of the supports her district offered.

The district did assign us outside mentors. I had one who came out to see me once a month and that was great, so I can't say that she necessarily came out and said well yeah, this is how you would write a school improvement plan, or this is how you should do whatever, but she was there to listen, to answer questions, and she was not district related and you could say anything you wanted to say like I don't understand why my IIO, which is who we had at the time, does this or doesn't do this or I'm not sure if I'm doing this right, so I loved that and I think that was very emotionally supportive as well as school supportive.

Denise shared about her continuing desire to keep the stability in her job even as her

tenure at the school increased and she chose to take more post-graduate classes.

You know adding on a couple nights of grad school with all your other responsibilities and still had the kids at home and a husband who came and went with his job, the last thing I felt I needed was more change, so I really didn't even, I don't even know what was available because I never looked at what was open. To me, principal seemed like enough.

She also shared stressors and expectations that were frustrating or unrealistic.

All the policy makers can't get together on what they want you to do, so I have three different safe school plans every year that I have to fill out and it's—just sounds very redundant and in one, you have eight people that are a part of your crisis team, in this one you have four, in this one you need backups, in this one you don't, in this one they're titled this, in this one they're titled that, and when you get down to it, I'm not gonna remember that third base is where I said we're gonna have reunification. I'm sure I'm not gonna go look for the plan if we're in a crisis and make sure I have the right person at the right place.

She talked about the general stressors she carries day-to-day and she worries if she can

operate at the level to meet all expectations.

> I want things just right and I want the school to have a good name and I don't want to be the one who's turning things in late and have my name on that. I don't want anything to look negative for the school. I don't want anything hitting the media you know, that show the negative for our school, so you feel very protective of showing the best, but I want everything right, and I want it done, and I want it just so, and I want it done well.

From the interview, I would not say she was a perfectionist, but she wanted the best for

her students and staff and wanted the school to be respected. She gave more details.

> It's not that the job can't be done, but maybe it can't be done at the level I would like to see it, where we're doing everything to a really high level. That's really hard to do, and if you're strong in one area, you're probably weak in something else, and so you have to kind of decide and prioritize what you think is most important and maybe it's only unrealistic because my expectations are too high for some of those areas.

> Denise discussed areas that she would like to have been supported differently.

> I wish I'd had a direct supervisor that I could have been a little bit more honest with, maybe about what was going on, but there were—had been a time and I think we're still in it, where some principals just disappear, and I think when that's true that your're guarded about what your weaknesses are when you're being asked by your supervisor what you need help with, and they're gonna be the one to, you know, to check on you later on. You might be revealing something that they might think is the beginning of your demise, that you know, you're not fixable or, you know, worthy to be supported and to be kept.

She also mentioned having instability within the leadership or direct supervisors was

difficult as well, ". . . about six supervisors in nine years." She said she and some of her

colleagues recently were discussing the lack of positive feedback that direct supervisors

give, even when schools made significant improvements.

> You just assume when everybody else does a great job they're getting all the accolades, you're not getting them because you must not be doing a good job, but they're out there telling somebody they're doing a good job and she goes no, even that year we had, no, she never said anything.

> She was asked if she would continue to stay at this school or would she consider a

move to another school or other position within the district.

> There's a part of me that wants to do something else but there's a part of me that doesn't want to be under any more stress and it would be great to take those experiences and go somewhere else but if I would take on a more highly impacted school that had a lot of difficulty with test scores and things like that and maybe I could bring something to it, but I don't think there would be a lot of patience with the district on how long that happened and although they may start with support, if it doesn't happen really fast, I think it could be withdrawn and I think it would, it would put me under more stress.

> Since Denise has held administrative positions for almost 13 years, all of those at

the same school and most as principal, this places her in a unique, somewhat rare

category of having long-term stability in a single school. When questioned about how she

has navigated around high expectations going into the same job each day, she shared,

> You, you've got to like the busyness, you've got to like, like I said, part of the chaos. You've gotta feel like, I think at a time that maybe you are making a difference for kids and maybe you're making things a little better for your teachers, that's what keeps me going.

Jack

Interviewee number nine was an African American male, Jack, who was in his fourth year as an elementary principal. After spending about seven years in the classroom, he served four years as an assistant principal before becoming principal at his current school. He spoke about his transition from teacher to administrator.

> I really enjoy teaching and I really enjoy teaching my content because that's where my very natural gift is, you know, but I kind of rose to the top as a leader in the building. I was always, you know, the chair of the leadership team, was a go-to encore person who worked, you know, if there were issues that we had, I was a point person for the teachers, to speak to administration and other teachers in the core areas too, you know, to get issues coordinated and resolved and that kind of stuff, and I'm just kind of, I'm just a natural leader and enjoy leadership.

Jack felt strongly that he was meant to lead, whether that was in the classroom as a teacher, or leading the entire school. As he began to take on more leadership roles during his teaching tenure, he had a principal who encouraged him to go back to school and get a master's degree to be able to work as an administrator.

Jack was concerned about how his relationship with students might change when he switched roles between teacher and principal.

> I really am somebody who thrives off the child aspect of this, I know everybody says that, but that really is what drives me, you know, in the educational realm of things, but I quickly learned that, you know, it was a different dynamic with respect to the kind of relationships that I would have with students, but in some ways more impactful, you know, from this position we're able to have a different kind of impact with families and how we lead staff in leading children and still able to have some really powerful relationship with students.

Therefore, Jack soon realized that he could still forge positive, impactful relationships with students, even from the principal's chair. It was definitely important to him to be able to stay close to the students and be able to make decisions that would have a positive result for his youngest stakeholders.

He also shared about some challenges he had faced in this first principalship. "My first year and even into my fourth year, my first year I literally got, I got baptized with just some really weird personnel issues." He described one teacher who allowed his anger to take over and commented, "I was baffled at the lack of support." He felt district personnel were inconsistent in their advice and follow up.

> I think it's become the culture of this district, the whole, the PR for sure, I'm sure that's an issue, but all people have to do is make it messy and make it personal and then we back up, that's my experience I mean, you know. I can make this about instruction and your lack of professionalism and classroom management, but if the teacher makes it about me and him, then you can get, you can get a response from the district.

He mentioned how stressful and time consuming it was to work with some of the angry, struggling teachers. "It's taking half my day to deal with something about some nutcase and it's taking away from instructional leadership." Once again, he did not think his district leadership was effective in helping with these touchy personnel issues and only offered "selective support."

In addition, he spoke about how sometimes poor teachers are allowed to transfer from school to school in the district. "So it's like do we pass, do we pass stuff along, or are we not able to, are we not willing to really deal with stuff, do you not care about this school, all schools?" However, on the positive side, he noted how adept he became at

documenting incompetence in poor teachers due to his experiences at this school. He felt

he got something positive from working with struggling staff. He desired to have

consistent support from the district leadership and he did not think this had happened

with direct supervisors.

> I haven't felt like our leaders, I'm being general with that, so that doesn't mean everybody, but I haven't felt like that—I haven't felt like all of our leaders have been fully and best equipped to lead, to lead in Common Core instructional leadership.

Jack shared supports he had been given in this school. He said due to the fact he

was in one of the most highly impacted elementary schools in the district, he was given a

retired administrator who came in to do some observations for him. He also shared about

another support person. "I had an executive mentor and she was a great, great help. She

was very impartial and wasn't directly connected to the district, you know, that was just a

once a month deal, but I really enjoyed her." Being Title I, and a new principal, his

school had many labels but his supervisor offered him another mentor from February to

the end of the year. He commented, "I really wanted to excel in my instructional

leadership and with elementary, I mean guided reading was something different." He

shared more about that partnership.

> She was a pistol and just, and she came and she was, she had, she was by far, she left the greatest impression on me as an instructional leader than anybody that's touched me, and she did that, from about February until about May, so in about three months, the lens that she kind of helped me to shape, because at that point, I didn't have the confidence I wanted . . . but she really helped me to, to dig deeper and to really kind of affirm what my lens for, you could really just walk with me into a room and say when you look at a guided reading lesson and you're a principal, this is what you want to see, this is what you don't want to see, I mean

it really drilled down. And it really propelled me, I don't, I would think it would be unfair for any new principal to not have someone offer that kind of mentorship and help. I don't know how we could not do that, but since then I haven't had any of that kind of support.

Since his work was in a highly-impacted school, he also faced issues of inequity and less parental support. ". . . so that inequity, because that's what, that's what it is, that inequity is a sore spot for me because I see things that we should have that we don't have." He discussed how he worked with parents to help them help the school.

> One of the things that—schools like Sandy Creek lack, is a polished parent voice for things that count, so where I am now in my leadership, I've been here now for a few years, and I've forged some good relationships, some strong relationships with some parents, and I'm really training them on how to advocate for the school, because they don't come with—they don't come with that skillset naturally, where if I go across the tracks . . .

He discussed how even when the district places a new piece of technology or equipment in all elementary schools, the schools with higher socio-economic students will get the installation well before schools like his, which is high minority and high poverty. Jack's passion for advocating for the best for his students and staff was pervasion throughout our discussion.

Since this was only Jack's fourth year as a principal, he saw himself as staying as a principal for the near future.

> I'm in this business because of children and so at the end of the day in order for me to sleep at night, I have to know that I am positively impacting children by my leadership with respect to teachers, parents, the community, and so I feel like my leadership here has been, has left a really positive impression on the community here and that's why I'm still here.

He would consider a move to a middle school in the future. He also discussed some long-range plans as far as his future education and goals.

> I'm interested in the superintendent's endorsement and the doctorate, sometimes you do that for doors to open. I love principaling, and so I'm not a fast track person trying to move up somewhere to do something wonderful, I really enjoy this work, and I want to do this for another long stretch.

Therefore, even though Jack was faced with a challenging school and some demanding staff members in his highly impacted elementary population, he felt he would remain a principal for a while, although he was not opposed to a move to a different school in the future.

Themes

Since principals serve in the core leadership position in schools across America, their position holds significance (Houston, 2008). Schools and districts can benefit from having consistency in the principalship. My initial inquiry was to determine the factors that influence principals to leave or stay in their assigned schools. The other undergirding research questions I hoped to answer through the interviews were:

1. What are the perceived stressors of school principals and do they impact their remaining at or departing from their schools?

2. What are the supports school principals receive and do they impact them to remain in their schools?

3. What are supports principals perceive they need but do not receive, and does not receiving them impact them to leave their schools?

As I was conducting the interviews, I asked all participants the same research questions, which focused on supports principals receive, supports needed, perceived stressors and reasons for leaving or staying. Several overarching themes arose from the analysis of the data from the in-depth interviews.

1. The importance of balance in the principalship

2. The impact of health issues on principals

3. The rewards of being a school leader

4. Advice to other principals

The Importance of Balance in the Principalship

Striving to achieve balance in the principalship was a universal theme among the nine principals interviewed. One of the female principals that had less than four years of experience shared about her struggle to find balance between her personal and professional life.

> The problem is, is that I love my job, so I could stay at school for hours. I mean, if I stayed at—if I didn't have a husband and a daughter, I would be at that school until eight o'clock every night, filling my time with stuff, and doing the list of things that I would like to do, the extra little touchy feely things of leaving the extra notes on the teachers' desks and calling more parents and you know, and all this because, I enjoy all of that time, and so I feel guilty when I'm doing some of those things, because I also love and enjoy the time with my family. And so–I still have to find balance with that, because I feel guilty when I leave work, and I feel guilty when I'm at home because I could do one or the other, so I would—I mean it's almost like if I walked away from school I could be a great fulltime mom, I mean I really could, and devote all of that there, so I think it would be easier if I didn't enjoy my job so much, maybe, but I'm thankful that I do because I think I would be absolutely, I mean I would obviously be miserable if I didn't.

Another female principal that was a veteran educator, also talked about trying to achieve

balance. She mentioned having a supportive husband and parents, yet it seemed she did

not feel like she did a good job of balancing and being there for her family.

> I live the job 24/7 and I don't think I balance it well at all. I think my husband is very supportive. He has—he does not mind helping with the boys. My parents moved up here when my son, who's now a teenager, was born, so they have helped a lot. If it wasn't for them, it would have been very difficult but they allow me space and time to spend as much time as I need to get it like I want it. But I have missed a lot of my son's award ceremonies and ball games and just time with the family because I was doing something job-related, so it's kind of sad but I have felt like that, that's what it took to get the job done and get it done well.

When discussing how school leaders can find balance, it also came up whether or

not principals can 'turn off' their Monday-Friday job after hours at home, on weekends

and on vacations. The first comments come from a newer principal, still becoming

comfortable in her new position and duties.

> I'm hoping I'm turning it off. Like at night, I've really gotten to the point where I've turned it off the—I don't look at emails in the middle of the night that come in, I used to do that, set my phone, and this is my—this, we don't have a house phone anymore, so it's this or a personal cell, and I'll set it on do not disturb, so it won't show emails but the phone can still ring in, so if Sentry Watch calls, I'll get that call. And on vacation, I still kept up with the email and set up interviews and worked while I was on the beach. That was when I would go out on my walks and my family didn't necessarily know what I was doing . . . I think so much is expected of us to always, always respond, 24, you know it's not even red carpet service, with red carpet service, customer service, we have to get back to people so quickly that if you start to let it—I feel like if I start to let it pile up that we'll never get ahead of it, so I'd rather try to stay ahead of it, but that's to a detriment that I'm always looking if there's something going on.

The next comments come from a veteran principal who has been successful in her tenure

in the district, yet she too feels she cannot get away from her principal role.

> We are never unreachable to the district now, and I think there is an expectation, now are they really trying to bother us on our personal time or at night and call us, no they're not, but there is an expectation that's there because when I do—and I do take vacations, we do go somewhere in the summer. I always have my cell, school cell phone . . . The very first vacation I think we took when I was a principal, I was on the beach, my husband does not like the beach in the summer when it's really hot, he'd rather stay in the air conditioning and watch sports channels, and I was out on the beach and he came down there and he threw both of my phones at me, my personal and my school cell, because they had both been ringing off the hook. When they can't get you on one they call the other, and he said the least you could do if you're gonna come on vacation if you're going to keep working is to keep your damn phones! He rarely cusses, but he was, he's a little irritated with that.

She explained that she feels overwhelmed when she goes without checking email for days and it is better for her to check them all along, even on vacations. She ended with this comment, "I can't turn it off, I can never turn it off, that's a thing about the job, too, you're it 24/7, 365 days a year, it is for me, I can't turn it off."

Another young female principal also gave credit to her husband for being supportive as well as her office staff. She felt she was doing a good job balancing even though it was early on in her career.

> I think two things contributed to the balance, one was my husband, you know, was very supportive, and the other was because I had a curriculum facilitator and a counselor and a data manager who all had kids, and I think they saw me as a new mother and wanted to say listen, we're going to step up and help because we know you need to go ahead and leave to pick up your daughter on time, you know, we can get this covered . . . so I think the internal support of my staff was very helpful to that, as well as just the personal support of my husband.

A veteran male principal who had worked at all three levels shared some about his issues with achieving balance along his career path. He began with his work at the elementary level and his issues with finding balance.

I continue to have that problem many years into being a principal but, you know, part of it is my personality, I'm a bit of a perfectionist, I want it done, and I want it done right, and I want it done now, so I accept that. Part of it is that what I've noticed is in that first job I really wanted to do it right . . . I wanted to do it right so I had to do a lot of figuring it out, so a lot of that figuring it out I did, you know sitting at my desk in my office at seven, eight, none o'clock in the evening.

He also shares how his work habits changed, with regard to getting all the work completed as he went to the middle school and then to the high school level.

You know, as I progressed into the next level, it became more about balancing how do you, how do I get all the stuff of the school done while also getting the athletics covered and, you know, the away games, and all that because it was middle school, and then of course it gets bigger at high school. It was in middle school when I started working six days a week instead of five. I would spend either Saturday or Sunday, at least five or six hours on one of the weekend days working on school-related things.

A veteran female principal discussed her ability to balance her personal life with that of the principalship and she shared about the lack of sleep that resulted.

I did a really good job of balancing early on, when the kids were still home. I think I did a pretty good job because I will push myself to the limit to make sure I'm there for my kids, so if it means I'm surviving off of four hours of sleep, I'll survive off of four hours of sleep. If I gotta get a paper written for, you know, class and I gotta be at a soccer game for my son, I'm not missing the soccer game to go write the paper. I don't know how healthy that is, sometimes not to get a lot of sleep or, you know, to be there but I think it's very difficult to balance but I didn't want my kids regretting later on that I was not there for them.

This principal also discussed how the difficulty in finding balance continues even though her kids are grown.

I think it is extremely difficult and I think it's a continuous battle and I really thought it would be much easier because I'm, I've been an empty nester for four

years now and I thought it would be easier to balance as an empty nester but when you've got kids and you've got different things going on with them, you're running one way and the husband or the wife is running the other way and you meet somewhere in the middle and I don't think the extended time commitment of the principalship is as noticeable. But when it's just the two of you at home, it's either work or me and all of a sudden you notice how busy you stay at work and before maybe you didn't notice because you were doing things with the kids, too. So, I think it's still difficult and I laugh and people laugh, at me when I say I'm gonna stay married, but I can tell you, you know, just the school leaders I've met through the years, how many people end up and have issues with marriage, definitely issues with the kids and they have shared regrets that they've had about times they missed with their kids or how much they felt like their job came in between them and their spouse and, you know, it's a hard balance still.

A newer male principal discusses his method of finding balance, especially with his wife.

I have to be—my desk doesn't look like it, but I have to be very organized and protect my time, every moment is extremely valuable. I kind of have my routine down, you know, when I'm going to do school work, when I'm going to look at my wife. So with her, a Friday night is our sacred date night, so if we didn't get, if we didn't get to do a whole lot or say whole lot in a week's time then, you know we both—ever since I've been in administration, Friday night has been our thing, so we keep that . . . but I think, you know, my wife and my daughter, they're very good to be able to share me and see me bouncing around all over the place, but I try to pick my spots and make them count.

Striving to achieve balance seemed to be an issue for male and female principals. Here's another perspective from a veteran male principal.

For me, family comes first, and I'm never, never ever deviated from that priority, and so whenever I was away from—whenever I'm away from work, whenever it's time to be off, it's family. Like for example, this past, this past Christmas break, I might have come here for two hours and it was intentional. But, would I have done this when I first started the principalship? Oh no. But I learned because it is going to be—the work's going to be there. What I try to do is cut this phone off or tell my wife to hide it, so I can't get to it.

A veteran female principal, with experience at all three levels, most recently high school,

spoke extensively about the time commitment required in this position and the lack of

personal/family time.

> As a high school principal, you don't have a personal life, you don't have one. I don't think you're a principal at all that you don't feel guilt, I mean there is just, because if you're at home you think you should be here, if you're here, you know, there's something that you could or should be doing at home, I mean I think that is just, there's no way around it, none. This job requires the principal to run a 60-hour week every week, not some weeks, every single week, and if a high school principal tells you they're not running a 60-hour week, they either need to come teach me how to do it better or they're, you know, they're not doing it, you know, as—the job is just that demanding. Nobody wants to put in a 60-hour week, you know, nobody wants to come in, well like okay, I'll give you night before last. I came and watched the, watched part of the JV game, I watched the girls' game, watched a little bit of the boys' game, it was running long because our girls went into overtime, so I left about 9:30, so I run by the grocery store, I pick up dog food, you know, I go home, I get in the shower, I get in bed, it's about 10:30, and they call and say your fire alarm's going off. You know so get back up, came back out here, and nobody plays out here, so I'm gonna meet them (law enforcement) out there, you know, it's a sensor, it's nothing huge, but it takes a long time and then you have to get the county schools to come out and say it's ok and then, you know, then you go home and you know, now it's one o'clock. You're back up early and, you know, there you go.

She shared that the long workweeks took away from her family time, and she regretted

the extra time invested in her job. This school leader was near the end of a long and

successful school leadership career.

> I think I wish someone had forced, not advised, but forced me to have a little more balance, you know, because you want to do well and you want to impress and you want to make sure everybody knows they didn't do something stupid by appointing you to whatever, you know, and, and so it starts to drive you and the, you know, something has to give, something has to give.

Because I was aware of this principal's impeccable reputation in her district, I was

stunned to hear her share her heart on how she had felt driven to put in so much time. It

made me wonder how many other principals, those not a part of this study, also struggle

with finding balance with a demanding occupation.

The Impact of Health Issues on Principals

During the interviews, the current or former principals were prompted to talk

about their careers as a school leader. However, one of the follow-up questions that I

often asked was, "Did you experience any health issues at this school that you believe

were related to your role as principal?" The reactions of participants to this question was

more surprising than any other information that was shared. Of the nine interviewees, all

nine shared at least one health related issue they believe was a direct result of the stress of

the job as school leader. Several discussed lack of sleep and poor eating habits, while

others had conditions, which were chronic and required daily medications. A newer

female principal working at the high school level said,

> The stress is definitely a health issue. For me, I think it's lack of sleep, I think
> that, you know, it also creates a place where I think in terms of being balanced in
> terms of your well-being of feeling happy and fulfilled, you know, that's also
> impacted when you're under the stress of not thinking that you're you know,
> meeting the expectations.

She went on to describe a particular day when she vomited at work, but just kept right on

with her meeting and duties.

> I remember having like my administrative meeting, which included the
> counselors, my social worker and I was saying that I didn't feel good, and they
> said well we could see your color in your face just going dull, and all of a sudden

I just throw up. And I get up, I go to the bathroom and wipe my mouth off and I'm coming right on back to the meeting, they were like no, really, you're not staying here, you are sick, and I was like, no, really. I feel fine, I can keep going, but I think that, that's also, you know, almost a sickness when you don't even realize that you may not be feeling well, but you keep pushing yourself beyond that.

She went on to describe why she felt stress was the culprit.

I think I just attributed a lot of things to stress, when you're not paying attention to the different signs, then to me I think other signs start showing up to try to say look, if your stomach starts, you know, and you start churning your stomach, your eating habits, you know, whatever, because all of that is a response to that trigger of stress.

This female principal, with less than four years in the principalship, discussed her health issues that arose during her first couple of years in the position.

I don't eat during the school day, so I know that that's impacted my health and stress. Last year, probably after Christmas break I was—I didn't realize it until sometime this summer that I realized I think I was, I think I was depressed, I really think I had gained about 20 or 30 pounds, but I have lost some of that weight now. I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't happy. I was managing to get through the school day but I would come home and I wasn't there for my family the way I needed to be. I wasn't there the way, you know, Max and I stopped talking, not because we weren't talking, it's just that we weren't talking deeply and I realized how much that I was giving everything to school . . . I think that I'm just gone more. That I'm mentally gone more. So not only physically, but—that if the phone rings, it's almost like I'm always waiting for something to happen, so I'm not fully entrenched in what is going on at home.

Another female principal, a veteran of almost ten years, discussed her issue with chronic stomach problems.

I just got through having a colonoscopy and an endoscopy because I had an infection in my stomach and my large intestine. My doctor, family doctor, she

says once I retire that I should be able to go off all medication, that's what she says. She says all that stuff that's wrong with you is because you know, I put a lot of stress on myself, I can't relax, I'm a very type-A personality, but it's stress and I don't take vacation very often because I found that I don't relax even when I'm on vacation, so I just, at least here, I'm here and then I'm taking care of stuff so I don't have to worry about what's going on when I'm not here, and that's not healthy, so that's my own, that's my own fault and it's something that I struggle with, so headaches, lots of different things, you know, going along with stress.

A young female principal in her first principalship was very open about the amount of stress in that position.

My last year there, well the year prior to, probably the spring prior to my last year, I found myself waking up at like three o'clock in the morning worrying about the school or worrying about this issue, and you know, is it going to get to the regional office, what does the regional office think? I've gotten this call from a parent or something or, you know, this test score wasn't what we wanted it to be, whatever it was, or sometimes I would just wake up, I was losing sleep, I was stressed, fretful. A lot of that was due to stress, the stress in the building, also stress and pressure from the district level that I was experiencing at the time—it started that spring prior to my last year, I could not, I couldn't get rest, just like oh wow, that's great, I just—I think I went probably the span of a year and did not, a year, year and a half, I just did not get restful sleep at all.

Similarly, this successful, veteran male principal shared about how difficult it was to lead a balanced life. He talked about being a little sick and how he continued to work, but gave his assistant principal different advice for the same symptoms.

I had a really bad chest cold last week and I worked, I took Nyquil at night and Dayquil during the day and just tried to function, but then on Thursday afternoon, one of my assistant principals seemed to be coming down with the same thing that I had been struggling with and I just insisted that she stay home on Friday. Now why didn't I do that for myself, you know, and so it's, I do think stress contributes and I think that we run—I think we wear ourselves out is what I think we do, we just keep going and going and going.

He also opened up about dealing with a prolonged illness. He shared how his parents felt

his job and his health issues were connected.

> Well my parents both want me out of this job. They have for the last few years, and I think they probably have noted, I mean, you know, and then especially after I got sick, you know, my mom in particular, just said you cannot go back to this, you can't do this. You just can't do this, this is, this is ridiculous, you can't work 15 hours a day, you can't, and it's just not worth it, and this is how I counteracted my mother, I said but you know mom, you know, a life well spent is spent doing something you enjoy, right, so if I am enjoying my work, then I should continue to do that, and so she kind of backs down at that point but she just feels like I could make a living doing something a lot less stressful, and I could, you know, maybe lots of people could.

Another veteran female principal had been discussing the difficulty of balancing her

personal and professional responsibilities and she felt like the biggest issue to her health

was lack of sleep. She spoke about how she relies on God to help her adjust to the lack of

rest.

> I have a very strong spiritual part of me that I'm just like hey God, you've got this and you're gonna help me figure this out and you're gonna have to find a way to multiply my time. You're gonna have to find a way to make me feel more rested when I've slept for three or four hours, you've gotta find a way.

> A young male principal, leading his first school (elementary), highlighted weight

gain and poor eating habits as his health issue.

> I just keep getting fatter! I've put on—I've put on about 15 pounds since I've been here. I'm here by seven, and I don't leave before seven most days, so a 12-hour day is my normal, and I'm, stopping and eating crap on my way home, stuff that's not good for me, and so that's the only thing, I know, I haven't had any, any breakdowns, any mental health issues.

A well-respected veteran female principal, who had worked at all three levels, shared an experience that caused a small health crisis while she was working as a high school principal.

> You know, I did one time at Creekside High. I had a pretty big one, but it was just the circumstances. We lost two students in the matter of two weeks and that was really tough and then I went right from there into AP testing and right from there into graduation, so the stress was—and I broke out in shingles the day of graduation, you know, and that one was truly just stress. It was just stress of all of it, you know. Yeah, it was all just a lot and dealing with those parents. I gave two eulogies two Saturdays in a row, you know, it was just a lot, yeah that one was probably the biggest.

A veteran male principal, who also had experience at all three levels, initially shared he had no health issues related to the principalship. However, as the conversation continued, he mentioned a couple medical conditions that could have been related to his job.

> No, because I knock on wood, I, the only thing that, health issues I experienced at that time was a kidney stone and I don't think that contributed to my time at Medley Middle School. I don't wish kidney stones on anybody but no, health was pretty good. I forced myself to get into a serious workout regimen, I was, you know, exercising, making sure I did that, so I didn't experience any health issues although, it's interesting, Medley Middle was the—it was the beginning of high blood pressure. I remember the second year there, my physical, my doctor was like, we can't—your blood pressure is beginning to not, it's beginning to be really high on a consistent basis. Yeah, so the stress of that, and I ended up being placed on a blood pressure medication. It could have been maybe getting a little older, the time off, so and again, you know, just the stresses of being an administrator.

In addition, he shared a recent experience in which he allowed anxiety over an upcoming job transition to affect his health and negatively affect his family time.

> On our anniversary this summer, it was my fault. I was sick the whole time, sick on my stomach because of nerves, nerves about, not that I couldn't do Hightown

High School, the unknowns. Our anniversary was in late summer, so July 1st, it was the first day, so I didn't fully have a grasp about what, what I had to work with, you know. So my nerves were all, I just couldn't (laughs) no matter you know, the Pepto Bismol, whatever I was, you know, taking and it was my fault, and I—as soon as like we got back, second day like July second, July third, I was back to normal, you know, because I—okay, I see okay, I see it, I'm looking at reports, I'm looking at data, okay, alright, you know, so I had to apologize, I said baby, I'm sorry, I just, I mean, you know, even for a veteran principal, I couldn't, I just couldn't separate it, you know, so but they've (his family) been really patient and they've put up with me. And I just try, you know, make them a priority always.

The Rewards of Being a School Leader

During the interviews, almost every school leader shared positives of the

principalship, the rewards of the position as well as the stressors. To begin with, a veteran

male principal discussed his challenges and successes at his second school. He felt the

school had been turned around and he was happy to see the results of his hard work.

I just connected really well to that school for some reason. When I got there, in my professional opinion, things were an absolute mess, and I had this fierce determination that I was gonna clean it up, and that I was going to make that school what I felt like it needed to be, and I was going to surround myself with people on that same mission and it took probably three or four years, honestly, to kind of make that happen. We had to do it incrementally and then—so during the fifth year, I just kind of sat back and enjoyed that a little bit I mean because you know, you kind of, you sort of start to enjoy the fruits of your labor a little bit.

Another veteran female principal that had been in the same school for a number of years

discussed the rewards of having that continuity.

I love staying in the same place and getting to see kids over time and then getting to see the siblings and getting to know families. You met them with one student and then you see them again because of a sibling. Our middle school campus connects with the high school, and I see our former students walking on the high school campus. I love to have conversations with them when they're in high

school, seeing what they do later. After so many years in the same building, I have had contact with so many different students, hundreds and hundreds. It is rare when my husband and I go somewhere in town on the weekend, out to eat, to a movie and you're running into someone, a former student or a parent and they are like, Did you used to work at . . .? I like having that sense of community, I like that—it's nice to see where kids end up, so I love that. It has kind of a long-term effect.

A young male principal who was in his first principalship at a highly-impacted school shared about what he saw as rewards. When sharing, he spoke with such pride on the accomplishments of the school.

Well, I think, in my time here, we got a lot accomplished and it's definitely a whole lot, it's, it's better now than what it was when I got it. We've got an awesome climate. Our climate and culture here is a very positive, upbeat, and student-friendly one, which, you know, wasn't necessarily the case before. We have a very strong constituency of partners in our community. We've got a lot of new teachers and a lot of turnover and I love working with new teachers. It's probably my favorite, it's probably my favorite interaction with teachers. I really have a heart with new teachers you know.

A veteran principal shared simple daily occurrences that act as rewards for him.

I could help students and parents as well and, you know, that for me is the reward you know, we're not, as educators, it's not the salary, it's helping people obtain goals, and it's a goal, even as small as needing a—to be picked up from home so you can go to school, to having lunch money, you know, to sitting down and talking to a senior and saying look, this is a school year calendar. I want you to look at how short 180 days really is once you back out holidays and workdays and let's take it, let's chunk this down into not 180 days but a week and let's talk about what we want to do by the end of this week and then, then realizing, okay, you can do it. I mean that, that is just, to me that's my super bowl trophy, and so that's kept me.

One educator that was interviewed was a former principal that had taken a position at the central office, but she reflected back on her time as a principal.

I liked being able to make a direct impact to your work. I liked the interaction with the students. I think that to me what was really, what I really enjoyed about education, and I guess I'm trying to make sure I am clearly able to describe it are the stories. I miss that, because as a principal you're connected to those stories, you're connected to, you know, those students and that connection continues to inspire you to be a better educator, so when you lose those stories, or you lose those connections, you really start to say why am I doing this, you know, like is this really making an impact, is this really making a difference, so I miss those, I miss my parents, I mean sometimes they can be difficult, but I miss them because I think that for me, my parents really were the source of feedback and encouragement as well about really being so appreciative for what you're doing for their child, and being so supportive of you leadership and what you are doing.

A young female principal shared some rewards of school leadership and assisting staff in making their job easier.

I think the biggest reward is when I see that I've made somebody else's job easier or better or that they're able to do their job more effectively because of something that we've changed within the system or the structure. For instance, I had a teacher who came in the night after open house who said they could really feel, they could feel the work that had been put into preparation for everything, and it was different than what had been in the past couple of years, and so that was that was very rewarding because it was—in one sense it was the acknowledgment of the work that we had put in on the forefront, and that they were feeling the results on the back end of it. I don't want to ever cause anybody to do more work, and so I think when I feel—I think that's the biggest thing, when I feel like they can do their job more effectively, they have what they need before they know they need it. That's when I know we are doing a good job.

A veteran female principal shared some rewards from her experiences at the elementary level.

I think the—seeing the fruits of my labor and the staff over time. We had incredible gains in achievement over time that I was there. For example, our fifth-grade science increased 26 points in five years, and all those years that I was there, we never went down in any area, we only came up. So, for me it was the job of being there, seeing the children achieve and the children happy. We started two field trips that they hadn't done before, one in fourth grade and one in fifth

and they look forward to that, starting new traditions, things like that, building on what they had, bringing in staff that were really, really high quality and watching them work with the kids and get just incredible gains and build such great rapport, so that, those were, for me, that's the most rewarding part, plus the little children, when you see them and they hug you in the hallway and they're happy to see you and you know you're making a difference for them.

However, during the interviews, other emerging themes arose from the stories of the school leaders. I would like to highlight some of those themes.

Advice to Other Principals

Begin mid-year. Several interviewees shared advice that either they would give to new principals or advice they wish someone would have given to them. First, a principal shared the best time of year to begin a principalship.

> It's so funny, because when I started, I started in the middle of the year, and I remember thinking to myself as a principal how that's the worst experience in the world because you have to come in and, you know, you've got to try to pick up like you've been there all the time, but to me it was actually the best, because I had an opportunity to kind of just come in, see how things were running, make notes about things that needed to be changed, you know, changed or altered, and then address it the following school year. So I guess if I had any feedback to a principal, I'd say go in the middle of the year, because I, you know, you're just kind of riding the tide until it comes to a close.

When discussing the transition to principalship, a second principal also mentioned the ease of taking over a school in the middle of the year.

> The transition from assistant principal to principal was smooth for me—for a couple of things I think made it somewhat smooth is because it was mid-year, so I think any time when it's mid-year, there are probably very few people, unless the school was in absolute disarray, that you go in and keep running, unless you change some things, and so things are still running, it's just a different person sitting in the chair. There's not a lot of decision-making really that had to go on

and not really a whole lot that needed to be changed even if I wanted to, that made it easy.

Both principals saw advantages to beginning a school leadership position mid-year. To my knowledge, these two were the only ones of the nine interviewed that began their first principalship mid-year and believed it may have had a significant impact on their initial success at their first schools.

Establish relationships with others. Several principals shared the importance of establishing relationships with staff members. Learning the strengths of staff members and getting them connected to the school vision was an asset as well as motivating them to carry out the vision.

> Look at how you can establish your relationship with your staff, to get them to help you, you know, the change throughout the school . . . I actually sometimes would specifically tune in to their leadership skills to get them to facilitate parts of the vision of our school plans, because that's always important too.

A veteran principal from the elementary level cited success as a school leader to building relationships.

> I think the principalship is, in order to be successful in the principalship, you have to know people and build relationships with people first and foremost. I think that is more important than anything you can learn in a book, and I think that you have to learn how to read people, understand what motivates them.

This principal also mentioned building relationships with staff, using that to push the teachers to a higher level.

I think you can have high expectations and kind of rub their back while putting their feet to the fire, and I think you have to let them know that you haven't forgotten what it feels like to be a teacher and to be tap dancing eight hours a day with children and how hard that job is . . . but if you don't go around and coach and support them, you're gonna turn around and nobody's behind you.

This principal also discussed how a colleague had done this during her tenure as a school leader. She had been an educator for over 38 years, 20 in the principalship. She reminisced about a conversation they had right before she retired.

I remember her saying that at the end, the most important thing was the relationships that she had built along the way, not all the little initiatives and programs and all of those things that come and go, but that those relationships with people and in getting the job done.

A principal shared about how another successful district principal had used relationship building to meet with success.

He's just the most straightforward, student first, this is what we're gonna do for the kids and, you know, if the adults like it at the end of the day, that's a bonus, if not, I'm not worried about it, but he's a great relationship-builder, and I think that that's helped him along the way because he built relationships with students and teachers.

Hire your own assistant principals/support staff. We know that school principals have a myriad of duties that they must fulfill in order to be successful. Large elementary, and middle and high schools, also employ assistant principals to assist and support the lead principal. Multiple principals from my research mentioned the importance of this position and stated their beliefs in wanting input on filling these crucial support roles.

You know, I felt like you know, getting the opportunity to build my team would have helped. I just—I didn't get that opportunity to build the team and, you know, having to spend days and days accumulating paperwork and write-ups and stuff on people is just, it's time consuming, it's a very time consuming process. And when your, your assistant principals aren't effective, it puts a lot more on you so then I was having to carry a lot more of the, you know, of the day-to-day responsibilities of the school, which then cost me in some of the responsibilities I needed to be taking care of as principal, so I didn't like that.

A principal was discussing how she was being directed to another school in the district and she knew she would be allowed to make a few requests of this transition and the first thing she asked for was to have input in her team of assistant principals.

I asked that I be given the opportunity to interview each of the assistant principals that was here and make the decision on whether or not they stayed. That was the first thing I asked for. And I asked that if there was a spot available, and there was somebody I didn't want, that I had the opportunity to bring who I wanted.

Also, one of the principals who shared about her first school and how in hindsight, she felt she should have been able to do more hiring and not have to accept placements of staff members from the district human resources department.

I should have been able to go in and hire AP's, or bring people that I wanted instead of having people placed, I wound up having an office support and an AP and a couple of teachers placed when I started, and I think that that would have made a huge opportunity, that would have been a huge opportunity for me to put my—to start putting my spin on instead of still trying to correct somebody's else's issues, so I think I wish somebody had told me to fight that a little different when I got that first letter that somebody, so and so was being placed at your school, to have picked up the phone and said "I can't take this person, I need to be able to pick and bring my own person." I wish I had recognized the power of even just saying that, because I didn't want to, I didn't want to not do what I was supposed to.

When another principal was thinking back to his success in a highly impacted middle

school, he mentioned hiring. "I—well going in, you know, I think my team of APs, they

allowed me to pick my APs . . . and so that was very crucial for me." He also told me that

one of those assistant principals was still with him and he had moved schools two more

times since then.

      Distribute leadership/avoid isolation. Not only did the principals discuss the

importance of hiring their support team members, but they also related the importance of

distributing some leadership responsibilities to create a better balance in the principalship

role. "You've got to figure out who has the capacity to take on some of that leadership in

the school and build on that and kind of push it out, because I think that kind of may

create some of the balance." Another principal specifically discussed delegating

responsibility to others would be the advice he would give to new principals.

> To learn to delegate, I think. I think as a new administrator I –in fact I know, as a
> new administrator I took on everything, and now, a number of years later, I feel
> comfortable saying well, here's something that you can do, go do it, now keep me
> in the loop, I don't want any surprises, but I trust you to go and do your –the
> things that have been delegated to you.

When thinking about how to share leadership responsibilities with others, the importance

of not isolating one's self in this school leadership role was revealed, as well as reaching

out to a colleague to share concerns.

> I think you really all have to be careful not to isolate yourself because then if you
> isolate yourself around your problems you begin to look at them unrealistically,
> and I've done that before, you know, like you're not really wanting to talk about
> it, or you're only talking about it to your husband, and that person doesn't have a
> clear perspective of, you know, talking about it to your husband, and that that

person doesn't have a clear perspective of, you know, what the job is all about, so you have to identify some people that give you a safe unit to talk about the health and kind of balance that in perspective , because I think you can get to be you know, very unrealistic about what you're trying to push yourself to do . . . Find somebody you can connect with, somebody that can be your buddy, hopefully somebody with a little more experience.

Conclusion

In Chapter IV, the nine participants were introduced through short profiles. A variety of quotes were shared so that the voices of the principals could be heard. We learned more about their entrance into education and the paths they followed in leading schools. Some stressors of the position, as well as and supports received, were identified. The profiles revealed several emerging themes that arose from the data. These themes included: (a) the importance of balance in the principalship, (b) the impact of health issues on principals; (c) the rewards of being a school leader; and (d) advice to other principals. The next chapter revisits the research questions and the subsequent findings will be explained, discussing the factors, supports, and/or stressors for either leaving or staying in the principalship.

CHAPTER V

REVISITING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they remain. My study sought to address the experiences of those individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools, including their needs or stressors and describing their external supports they perceive causing them to stay. Collected and analyzed data addressed the following research questions:

- What factors influence principals to leave (or stay in) their assigned schools?

- What are the perceived stressors of school principals and do they impact their remaining at, or departing from, their schools?

- What are the supports school principals receive and do they impact them to remain in their schools?

- What are the supports principals perceive that they need but do not receive, and does not receiving them impact them to leave their schools?

The data for these questions were collected through face-to-face interviews with nine current or former principals from districts in central North Carolina. The school leaders were able to tell their stories in relation to the research questions. The sections that follow summarize the input from the participants that addressed the four research questions.

Factors Influencing Principals to Leave

Leaving the Principalship

One out of every five principals leaves his or her school each year (Béteille et al., 2011). Since principals impact student achievement by being instructional leaders, principal turnover negatively impacts student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). The analysis of the data from these individuals reveals factors that influence principals to leave their schools which is important for districts to understand. Two of the nine interviewees that had been school principals, left the principalship altogether. Both of them had four years or less of experience in the principal role. One educator left her school to take a central office position. She shared that she was previously offered another school with a higher salary earlier in her career, but she chose to stay in her first school.

> I remember when I went home and told my husband that I'd been asked about another school, and I told him, you know, it's going to be a six-figure salary, and he's like well wait a minute, you need to think about this, and you know, when I started talking to him about how happy I was at my school, what benefit it offered to us about a balance in our family, that outweighs the money because the money does not compensate you for your livelihood and, you know, it's for that, to me, the level of stress that may come with whatever they're offering you for that other school, so you have to really think about that.

She subsequently left her principalship for a central office position, but I do not think she was influenced by salary alone. I know that she most likely did receive a pay increase, but she must have felt like the promotion offered less stress than other positions. She had mentioned it was in her goals to finish her doctorate degree and to work in the central office, but I think the opportunity arose more quickly than she anticipated. I

believe she enjoyed her time in the principalship and was successful, but that it may have

acted as a stepping stone to the central office. "I mean I really feel very fortunate that I

was to, you know, kind of, you know, find a pathway for my trajectory, but I know that

was, you know, by faith, I think it was a lot of hard work." Having been in the principal's

seat will make it easier for her to relate to how decisions will affect stakeholders at the

school level.

She mentioned that her district did not have a clear pathway to promotion for

school leaders.

> You also have principals who have been in schools that wanted to move forward
> and in a lot of ways they really probably should have been able to because of their
> experiences and the way they were able to make an impact on their school, but
> because they were good at what they were doing, they may have been—so, you
> just have to stay there.

Even though she was able to move from being a successful principal to central office, she

believes others are not able to do so. Possibly, district leaders do not want to promote

some principals into district leadership if they think it will be difficult to replace them at

their schools.

Next, the other interviewee that had not remained in the principalship had left to

become an assistant principal. She did make the decision to leave the principalship on her

own, but she admitted she was under consistent pressure from her district office. Another

principal spoke about observing leaders in her district disappear.

> Sometimes people leave and you knew that that originally wasn't what they
> wanted to do and you know they left under some duress, whether or not they
> resigned on their own, you still knew they went through with a lot, they kind of

wanted to go because maybe the pressure they had been put under of the different goals they had been given that you needed to reach and couldn't, so you knew that could happen to people.

The former principal also mentioned several stressors she faced in her role as school leader and one was needing to be able to build her own administrative team.

Principals need to be able to build their team and you have to trust the principal to know, that's in that building every day, what that building needs and what the cohesiveness of the team is gonna be, because not only what the school needs, but then how are we gonna operate as a team and as a unit.

She felt having less than competent assistant principals was a contributor to her derailment as a school principal. When things were not going as expected at her school, she eventually received additional support from a mentor and she shared documents with her supervisor to show how she was handling a number of critical issues; yet, she did not feel supported.

If you're going to provide support then provide it, follow it through, debrief it, break it down, did it work, did it not work. If it didn't work, hey, this is not working what do we need to do? If it did work, hey, this is working, now where do we go, but don't just do stuff to check a box and I think sometimes in education, that's what we do, you know, we're checking a box, well we tried it, check the box.

In the research of Glasman and Glasman (2007), they formulated thirteen competencies that principals needed to acquire to be successful, some of which can be obtained at the novice level, while others can only be obtained at the experienced level. Therefore, they believed that, ". . . no school leader should be held totally accountable prior to having some actual experience" (p. 157). As principals gain experience in leading schools, they

will be able to acquire the other competencies along the way. Thus, district leaders should be realistic about how much time it may take a principal to turn a school around and allow that school leader time to acquire the necessary skills.

The last thing she discussed about causing her to leave her school was that she may have taken a school that was not the right fit for her. She mentioned that it had more issues going on that she initially realized, and maybe it was not a good place to have a first principalship. That raises the issue of how district leaders match principal characteristics and experiences with schools. Are some principals facing failure by placing them in a school with issues so challenging that it does not match their skillset? Since she worked in a highly-impacted school, she was more likely to leave her school as the research of Fuller et al. (2008) revealed. Could this principal have been successful with more supports from her district and with a supportive team surrounding her? We cannot know for sure, but we must consider these factors when school leaders are being interviewed and placed in schools. Table 3 contains reasons the school leaders left the principalship and did not return.

Table 3

Reasons Given for Leaving the Principalship

Participant Response	P	D
School not a good fit	x	
Supervisor did not provide adequate support	x	
Inherited administrative team that were not competent, too many responsibilities for leader		x
Constant pressure from supervisor/district	x	

Table 3

Cont.

Participant Response	P	D
New position held less stress than the principalship	x	
Had been in principalship long enough to get experience		x
District had no clear path for promotion		x
Central office position became available		x

Note. P = perceived (personal interpretation); D = direct (job qualities, opportunities and/or limitations).

Principals Leaving One School for Another

There were four interviewees that had led two or more schools during their time

as principal. One principal had been placed at her first school by the superintendent. She

commented, "I didn't get to pick, I didn't interview." After she completed her fourth year

at the school, she felt like she had it in good shape. She had moved out weaker staff, had

hired some strong teachers, achievement scores had improved and the community was

involved. Her commute to work was almost an hour and she began to apply for other

principalships that were closer to her home. She was ready for a move for two reasons-

she wanted to have a shorter drive to work and she was ready for another challenge since

she had corrected the major things negatively impacting the school.

> I had tried two other times to move closer to home after like my third or fourth
> year at Sun Valley. Murrayville came up, I'd interviewed there, didn't get it.
> Hightower came up, I was pretty much told that I wasn't gonna be allowed to go,
> and so when this one came up, I talked to my supervisor and he said I guess this
> time I can't be selfish and it's probably, you know if you want to go, I'm gonna
> let you go.

She was allowed to move to another school and that was where she was still working at the time of our interview. She was nearing ten years as an administrator and felt like she would retire soon after that. She spoke briefly about why she thinks principals leave their jobs at other schools.

> I think that principals don't feel supported, and I think sometimes that that causes them to leave. I think the extreme burnout causes people to leave. I think, you know, of course the health issues that come from the stress and the burden of carrying everything on your shoulders I think wears on you like it would anybody in a leadership position . . . and it's very hard when we don't get raises, we don't get, there's not promotion feeling, there's no sense of I've earned my longevity, so you don't feel like you're growing any more as a professional, you're not getting those financial rewards, which makes it hard. I think that with the charter schools and private schools and all of those things pulling on us, we've become a business that we have to market.

In summary, she left her school for another at her own discretion, for personal and professional reasons. She did mention several other factors that may cause a principal to be stressed and affect her or his tenure in a building. However, it is hard to determine how much any one factor might negatively impact the principal. Most likely, it would be a combination of factors for one to make this decision.

The second principal who had left one school for another shared how those transitions came about. He was directed to move, by his superintendent, from the first to the second school which had a lot of challenges. The district leadership felt he could make the needed adjustments and wanted him at the second, more challenging school. He was successful at making numerous positive changes with instruction, staffing and achievement, but things were not consistently at a high level and he was dealing with multiple supervisors while at that school. He felt a disconnect between he and his last

boss, and he began to look for other principal opportunities. "I just feel like it caused me to get a little more aggressive in my looking." He described one area of frustration.

> She did not care for what I call professional debate, you know, if she said it should be done, then it should be done, and I'm saying well let's think about it like this, or can you also consider this factor, and there was none of that and so where I struggled internally was here's a person who does not know my school, for whatever reason, isn't taking the time to figure it out, but yet has an opinion about the way I should be running it . . . so to me that just felt like a really bad combination.

The lack of support from district leadership was definitely a factor in him moving to his next school, a high school. "One of my goals had been to be at all three levels since at one point in my career, my goal was to be a superintendent, that's not necessarily the case anymore." At the time of our interview, he was in his fifth year and felt like the school was moving in the right direction. He was unsure if he would remain at that school or consider a district leadership position in the future. "If I could choose the perfect position for myself, the position would be coaching and supporting principals."

This principal left his schools for two differing reasons, one being a directive from the superintendent and the other move was self-imposed. His motivations were to get experience at all three levels and the last move was hastened due to the non-supportive supervisor. He shared a conversation he had recently with a peer about the difficulties of the principalship. "I was talking with a colleague of mine and said, who said to me, you know this job is getting almost undoable, and I said it's getting tougher, that's for sure." This perception is in alignment with Villani (2008), who argues that the expectation has become for a principal to be superhuman. There seems to be some

consensus among school leaders that this job is challenging and leaders are faced with

many stressors that may impact their staying or leaving.

The third principal had worked at multiple schools, at all three levels. When she

was questioned about the moves, she kept saying she was directed to the new schools, she

did not apply or ask to be moved except for one "which was different because they were

re-districting over there and it would have been a pay cut . . . I knew I was gonna be

moving, I just didn't know exactly where." She shared more about those directives and

why they were given:

> You know, because I was always in somewhat of that pattern, my job was always
> what they called to go in and raise, fix something or raise something, you know,
> that was always my directive. The superintendents have always given me
> directives to, this is what I want you to go do, so to speak. I want you to go raise
> that, you know, clean up that, whatever that looked like. I've always been given
> very specific information about what they want, so to speak.

Thus, the majority of the changes that she made were due to being directed by district

leadership. She admitted, "I was excited because you have a real mission, so to speak,

you have a real mission that you know you're supposed to go in there and do." I believe

they saw her as a turnaround principal and used her to go in and make quick and specific

changes in schools. She did mention a stressor that she believed could cause principals to

consider leaving their schools.

> I think we have to stop blaming the principal for everything, and I have been very
> clear and very vocal on that. If somebody wants to tell me that I failed, then my
> boss equally failed, and if they want to fire me, the boss should have to go too . . .
> If you had a different paradigm, they would have more of a vested interest in
> helping you succeed rather than documenting what you're not doing well.

Although she was directed to move by district leadership from the schools she was

leading, she also attributed moves by other principals due to principals being responsible

for everything and not receiving sufficient support from supervisors to be successful with

all their duties. Johnston and Williamson (2014) cited the principalship as one of the most

complex jobs in our society and without proper support, school leaders may struggle with

the myriad of responsibilities. Since she was a veteran principal, I was curious if she ever

considered doing something besides being a principal and what may have motivated her

to remain as a principal.

> I certainly did, I mean I think you'd be crazy not to at least think about can I do something with a little less hours and a little less stress and a you know, a little more, a little more money . . . I never applied, I never once applied for another position outside the principalship and, you know, I said, but I spent a lot of time thinking about it and the reason, there are several reasons why I didn't, and one was the grass ain't always greener. Number two, I did not, I could not in good conscience let somebody tell me what to go tell a school if I disagreed with it. I just couldn't do it.

So, although this principal remained a school leader throughout her career, she did

consider other options. I admire her for not desiring a higher position if it meant you had

to give a principal advice she did not believe. Her comments also reveal she must have

been given advice during her career that she felt was not effective or appropriate: yet,

disagreeing with her supervisor did not appear to negatively impact her career as a school

leader.

The fourth principal I interviewed that had moved schools but remained in the

principalship, had led four different schools in his career. He shared he was assigned to

his first school and after two years there, he was directed by district leadership to move.

After three years, another school was proposed to him and he accepted the position,

spending six years at the third school. He discussed the difficulty in changing schools.

> I've always got, I've always had a lump in my throat when I tell my staff goodbye . . . the staff was mine, I knew their children, I knew when they were born, I mean so it, that morning I was the biggest baby . . . I said hey, you know, I wasn't looking for it, I wasn't, I wasn't looking for a change, you know, we've still got work to do, and you know, it's almost like you're letting your family down to a certain extent, you know, you're saying hey, I'm jumping off this ship and I'm leaving.

Once again, another school was proposed to him and he agreed to their suggestion and

moved yet again. Therefore, he did not apply for any of the schools which he led. He was

either directed to go or it was proposed to him to move to another school.

I also asked him if he saw himself continuing on as a principal and why he had

remained in this role as long as he had.

> Our days are out and about, you know, whether in the community, whether in classrooms, the cafeteria, you know, and it, I just can't see myself, you know, at this point in my life, this is it. It's not a knock on our central office folk, you know, that's their desire but I need that kid to fix, I need the upset parent, I need a teacher who is upset with me because I changed his or her classroom over the summer. Those things still motivate me, they keep me, they keep me going and, you know, jut proving people wrong about public education and the youth of today, because there are so many good things that our young folk do.

Once again, this principal seemed to have been used by his district as a turnaround

principal or he was used because he had a specific skillset certain schools in the district

needed. It is likely he will remain in the principal role since he seemed sincere about his

need to be in the school assisting students and teachers and he has been able to sustain his

passion. In the review of pertinent literature, I found that Brubaker and Williams (2010)

were also concerned if school leaders could sustain the passion over time in the position and these four principals have found a pathway. The success of these four principals working in a variety of schools agrees with the findings that school leaders with more experience, coming from more than one school, have less burnout (Brock & Grady, 2002).

The reasons that the principals gave for leaving one school for another are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Reasons Principals Gave for Leaving One School for Another

Participant Response	P	D
Wanted a school closer to home	x	
Needed a new challenge	x	
Directed to leave by the superintendent		x
Non-supportive supervisor	x	
Desired to work at third level of schooling	x	
Transfer to avoid cut in pay		x
District leaders proposed a new school		x
Too many changes in supervisors	x	
Lack of autonomy at school	x	
Blaming principal for issues	x	
Exhaustion leading an urban school	x	

Note. P = perceived (personal interpretation); D = direct (job qualities, opportunities and/or limitations).

Principals Who Stayed at One School

Three of nine interviewees were principals that had remained at only one school. When the first interviewee in this category, a principal with four or less years, was asked

if she saw herself remaining at this school for a number of years or doing something

different, she shared her thoughts.

> I've thought about it a lot because we live—I live so far away from the school . . .
> I also know that this is the first year that I really feel like the teachers are ready to
> do some things differently, so I don't want to really leave at the end of this year
> because I think oh, if they're ready to do this, what's going to happen next year?

She would need to remain at her school for almost another decade to make it until

retirement and I asked her if she would consider that.

> Nine years seems like a long time to be a principal, for nine years, but I also don't
> want to go backwards, and I don't feel like I'm ready to go to a position higher
> until I feel like I know what I've done has worked and why it's worked.

She also shared, "I was a great AP. I don't feel like I'm a great principal yet." Therefore,

it seemed like this young principal may remain in her current school for a while longer,

but she may be open to other options in her future. She mentioned a financial bonus she

could receive after remaining five years at her school and it was a factor in staying. When

asked why she thought educators leave their schools or why they remain, she shared more

of her thoughts about today's principalship.

> I think it's unfortunate that people who are as passionate about education who go
> into the principalship for making a difference and wanting to impact student
> success, both emotionally and academically, and all those pieces get pigeonholed
> into a very finite set of circumstances and get frustrated, and either get out of the
> box by going on higher, and then they reinforce the box, or by getting out of it
> and circumventing the box.

Her analogy of viewing the principalship role as being part of a box is interesting. She

does not believe school leaders are allowed to be creative, and they can feel trapped by

the confines of directives and initiative as if in a box. When principals leave for district

leadership, she sees this as reinforcing the confines of the role or leaving the role behind

altogether. She has an interesting viewpoint of the micro political piece of how leaders in

schools and districts can contribute to principals having less autonomy and support.

The second interviewee had remained at one school for over nine years. She

shared that "I really wanted to be there for a while and after I'd been there, gosh, not all

that many years, maybe three or four is when I got in the Ed.S. and Ed.D. program." She

went on to explain how busy she was running a school and taking classes and it was not a

good time to move. She also shared once she learned more about the superintendency,

she did not think she really wanted to pursue that career path. "To me principal seemed

like enough." However, she did share she has thought about other positions.

> I realized, hey, you could do something before retirement if you wanted to and I
> have at least, I'll say look when things come out now and kind of feel like I'd love
> to do one more thing before I leave the field of education, but that right thing
> hasn't really come along and I am not taking another position that gives me more
> money if more stress comes with it, I just cannot do it, I'm not doing it.

She shared other reasons why she has stayed in her position for so long. "I like the variety

of things that you get to do, and I love still being around the kids and getting connected to

the community by staying in one place." She mentioned having six supervisors in nine

years was stressful and resulted in sporadic support due to the constant transitions. She

shared in depth about one of those supervisors and why she felt unsupported, and she was

glad when that leadership change happened.

> I figured out pretty quickly that to me it felt like she was a supervisor that was a little, she was like a shark that can smell blood, and so if a shark smells blood they're after it, and not in a good kind of way, and so my goal was, while she was my direct supervisor, not to let her see any blood, so no matter what was going on in my building or what I would have appreciated having some help with, when she came in, I told her everything was great, it's fine, absolutely fine.

So, during at least one point in her principalship, she had an unsupportive supervisor, yet

she stayed on in her school. Another principal described her direct leadership.

> Well, you know, you were expected to do it on your own, you know, you're expected to know everything, do everything, and then you're supposed to call your zone who will hold it against you when you make a mistake, so you don't call, you do not call.

However, there were other principals who admitted to not having a supportive boss and it

influenced their decision to make a move. The influence of a non-supportive boss can

negatively impact the job, but does not assure a move.

The third principal, who had only worked at one school, was in his fourth year at

his first school. During his interview, he gave several examples of challenges he faced

with personnel issues, rallying the community and even some issues with his direct

supervisor.

> This past school year, I was probably spoken to like I was about five years old, because of, because of low EOG scores . . . When you come visit, do you even have a cause for concern, no, do you tell me you like what you see, yes, so, so when EOG's come out and you don't see the proficiency you want to see, it becomes something different.

He did express a strong sense of passion for his duties as a principal, "I absolutely love the work that I do." He was considering a move in the future from the elementary level to the middle school level.

Even though this principal had only been at one school thus far in his career, I believe he will change schools in the near future. The factors most likely influencing him were unsupportive leadership and a desire for a new challenge. Also, it is important to note that he worked with a highly impacted urban school population and the turnover at this schools is higher according to what I learned from the review of the researchers (David & Cuban, 2010; Fuller et al., 2008; Papa, 2007). This principal shared with me some advice he had received. "I've been told by some mentors that I should be careful not to get burned out in schools like this, you know, most of my educational career has been working in highly impacted schools." Reaching burnout at highly impacted urban schools is likely to happen quicker than traditional schools and thus increase the chances for turnover.

The data gathered from the principals who remained in the principalship, working in only one school thus far, are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Principals that Stayed at One School

Participant Response	P	D
Desire to keep momentum for change going with staff	x	
Wants to experience success in principalship before moving up		x
Passion for the work of the principalship	x	

Table 5

Cont.

Participant Response	P	D
Wants to stay for at least five years to qualify for a financial bonus		x
Too busy taking graduate classes to change schools	x	
Lack of desire to work at the district level	x	
Likes the connections to the community by working at one school	x	

Note. P = perceived (personal interpretation); D = direct (job qualities, opportunities and/or limitations).

Stressors of School Principals

During the interview portion of the research, stressors emerged that may impact the principal's decision to leave or stay at the school. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact effect each stressor may have upon the school leader, but the more stressors they have and the longer they   have them, can influence their ability to successfully lead. In reviewing the literature surrounding the principalship, persistent stress was cited as a factor in the turnover of some principals (West et al., 2010). I want to elaborate on some of the findings from the data of stressors in the principalship.

Pressure to Raise Achievement Scores/Accountability

From the data collected, the stressor impacting principals the most is that of raising achievement levels or scores from standardized testing. As one principal put it, "Accountability, everything's about accountability, but I want it to be about the kids and I want it to be that we did well because we're doing the right things." This concurs with the literature review findings that principals are held accountable for school achievement

(Fullan, 2014; Spillane & Hunt, 2010). Spillane noted, "As state and federal government agencies impose on local schools high stakes accountability mechanisms tied to student achievement on standardized tests, school staff are left to figure out how best to improve classroom teaching and learning" (as cited in Malone, 2013, p. 40). The principal must have a vision for supporting teachers to raise achievement. A principal shared a conversation she had with her supervisor after the regional team had toured her building in the late spring.

> She looked at me and she said, you know what, it really doesn't matter about that other stuff your school does well at, that fluff, what matters are the test scores and I'll never forget that and it was a very negative thing, in my opinion because that fluff is—because we have a great encore program and a band program and we do a lot of things with character development, but I mean there are all these other bits and pieces. We enter a group in the gravity games and a lot of those other after school and extra things are ways for kids to be challenged and to excel and to be a part of a community and I'm proud of the stuff that's fluff and I think that's what makes some of our kids happy and feel connected to school.

This quote from a school leader aligns with the research of Houston (2008), ". . . schools must guard against the impulse to score well on the accountability measures while we ignore the basic work of education-to help children grow into their full potential to become contributing and honest members of the good society" (p. 121). Another principal shared about turning in an improvement plan to her district supervisor after test scores arrived.

> But the accountability issue sometimes was really stressful, like I think about when they changed the standards for curriculum, and the scores came out in November, and then I remember my supervisor asking me in a week's time to, you know turn over an action plan for improving low scores. And, you know, we got limited information about what our results were to begin with, and so in my

mind I'm thinking if I knew what to do to improve, then I wouldn't have had those scores, and you're taking a week. So, I remember feeling frustrated with feeling like this is an irrational thought that I had that I can't tell you in a week how I'm going to change the scores you know, when all I have is a number.

Due to the pressures coming from the district levels, principals feel they must be focused on testing more than being focused on students. One principal shared, "I did not like being a principal that thought about accountability every day and I hate, I despise, talking to my teachers or my kids or my parents and talk about a test, I despise that."

The pressure that comes from the district on student achievement is driven by state and federal directives, not just those at the local level. Therefore, there seems to be a national focus on student achievement that trickles down to the state, local, and school level. One principal commented, "I think that district leaders find themselves fighting that battle of what does the district look like on paper versus what are we doing for students." Within the expectations for growing students at differing government levels, the dilemma of raising proficiency of students and raising growth has also arisen.

We've gone from being about growth for many, many years and then it for a little while went through a period of time while I've been an administrator it was about proficiency, and then now we're about growth and proficiency, we need to have both. You need to grow and you need to definitely increase your proficiency, so even if you may—exceed growth this year at a school, we were expected, but if your proficiency was low, you have nothing to be proud of, that's pretty much the message that's coming out there and I think part of that, of course, is local expectation, but the local is influenced by the state and the state's influenced by the federal government.

In North Carolina, the state now issues a report card for every school with grades from A-F and this grade comes from the test scores of your students, 80% from

proficiency and 20% from growth. If a principal wanted to please the politicians and

district leaders, he would need to focus on student achievement only, but most school

leaders care too much about their students to be driven by scores alone. One principal

explained it this way, "I actually think about what's best for kids, that individual kid, so

people like me are having to balance that with what's best for scores too." Some

principals feel more pressure that others to raise scores, especially principals placed in

schools as turnaround leaders. This is revealed by the comment from a school leader,

"I'm like well, if I don't hit these marks, then I won't be sitting in the principal's seat." A

principal under scrutiny explained her perspective.

> I locked horns with my regional superintendent, I think at the end of the day
> though they're all still driven by those set of standard scores and all that has come
> down from Raleigh that, you know, what school performance is supposed to be
> and, you know, pressure from the superintendent to say we can't have you know,
> these schools, these F's, these D's or whatever, we've got to do something about
> that, it's just that, you know, we're not sitting to—down together, district
> leadership and school leadership to really determine what we can do improve the
> quality of what's going on. And the pressure keeps getting applied down, but
> nobody's talking about how can we—how about we alleviate this pressure and
> stress for all of us, let's work together so that we as building leaders can give you
> as district leaders what need to get in Raleigh as far as you know, trying to
> improve school performance.

There is not a definitive way to know how much stress principals experience due

to standardized testing and how this may affect their willingness to stay in their schools

or look at other professional opportunities, but it was a clear theme when analyzing the

stressors school leaders must navigate.

Lack of Support from Supervisors/District

Another common stressor among principals was that of not feeling supported. The data revealed that every principal interviewed experienced at least a period of time in their tenure in schools that supports were lacking. This occurred with the veteran principals as well as the school leaders with less experience. One principal shared that his supervisor provided "shifty support" and would use bully tactics in her dealings with him and his school. Another principal talked about the supervisor she had early on in her career.

> How would I describe her personality, very domineering, very I am the expert, you are not, very much able to find the crack in the wall, find the leaky air, find what might not be right and bring that to your attention. She used to come and visit and sit in my office and pop off questions so quickly that I couldn't even answer the first one before she was asking me the second one, and they came just kind of out of the blue, like to me they appeared random. She may have had a purpose, but it was never like well let's talk about, you know, how you staff your building or how you, you know, know whom to put with what types of kids, I mean it was, it was just always stuff that seemed out of the blue to me and if it was related to a topic, I couldn't tell . . . I almost felt like I had to be protective of my teachers because if there was a teacher that needed something I had to find another way to get them help. If I did it with her, it would come on too strong.

This type of supervisor/principal interaction is not supportive and I can understand why it was identified as a stressor for multiple principals. The lack of support did not usually influence principals to leave, but it affected the stress level and probably negatively impacted their ability to lead staff and students as effectively as could have occurred with better district support.

Stress from Health Issues

One of the themes identified earlier was that of health issues of principals. Several

principals did attribute their health issues due to the stresses of their responsibilities. It

could be something as simple as poor eating habits and lack of sleep or chronic

conditions of high blood pressure, digestive problems and depression. In discussing this

with the school leaders I found it humorous when one school leader felt she was being

healthy and eating every day, but then admits she only gives herself five or six minutes

for a meal. I do not think this is healthy.

> I know I've heard a lot of people say they skip meals. I like to eat. I don't usually
> go down and have a sit down meal. I stopped eating in the cafeteria about three or
> four years ago because it was unhealthy stuff and at my age, I was putting on
> weight very easily, so I try to pack something from home that's a little more
> healthy most days and so sometimes it's a salad I can eat at my desk or I may go
> into our little kitchen lounge area and warm up some leftovers from the night
> before, but I can eat in five or six minutes, that's not a problem at all and then I
> get back to it.

Why do principals either skip eating lunch or only allow themselves a few minutes for a

meal? What other health issues can be related to stress in the principalship? Some

principals described more chronic conditions which they felt resulted from the stress that

comes with the principalship.

> Well, I think that I was at that second school where I first went on blood pressure
> medication. Now, would that have happened had I not have gone there, I don't
> know. I can tell you that it was pretty stressful there. It was pretty demanding, my
> eating habits probably were not what they should be because I was not, I just
> spent so much time there, and then when you leave after a 14-hour day, you're not
> gonna go home and make healthy foods, right, you're gonna eat whatever you can
> get from a drive-thru or a pick up.

As he commented, it is impossible to know how much effect the pressures from the

school in which he was leading affected his propensity to acquire high blood pressure,

but he did admit it was a high stress environment. The health issues shared by these

administrators aligns with findings from the literature review where stress can exhibit

itself in physical or mental ways and ulcers, high blood pressure and trouble sleeping can

arise (Marshall & Casten, 1994).

Besides poor eating habits, the next most common health issue was having

difficulty sleeping. This is how one principal described the issue.

> I think maybe having difficulty sleeping sometimes because your mind is just
> moving, moving . . . there's so many things you're thinking of, I gotta do this, I
> gotta do that and if you roll over and you somehow or maybe it's just because
> you're thinking about all those things that you know, you need to be doing, so
> healthwise, probably affected my sleep.

This principal was not taking prescriptive medication at the time of interview, but did

share she had used over-the-counter medications to help her rest better. Several

interviewees mentioned sleep issues being a problem, some not being able to obtain

restful sleep and others that attributed long working days to going to bed very late and not

getting the rest needed to be healthy.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, I coded 43 differing stressors that

principals mentioned during the one-on-one sessions (Table 7). I combined similar issues

and have highlighted the ones that were most common among all school leaders. I had

anticipated that school safety, low budgets, and the need for technology would have a

significant impact in schools, but these were barely mentioned. In the profile portion of

the analysis, more details were given on how these stressors had an impact on decisions to stay or to leave. The data revealed that no one issue would likely cause a principal to derail, but having a combination of the major issues would create more job dissatisfaction, or burnout which could lend itself to changing positions or leaving altogether. This connects to what I learned from Conley and Cooper's (2011) findings and indicate that principals can crash from the stress and pressure.

However, the data showed you could stay in a position even in the midst of facing multiple stressors. This allows me to conclude that these school leaders possessed the grit or the passion and perseverance to work through the tough issues. Individuals who possess grit are more likely to stay in their current and difficult situations (Duckworth, 2016).

In analyzing the data from the interviews, I coded 43 differing stressors that principals mentioned during the one-on-one sessions which are referenced in Table 6.

Table 6

Stressors for School Principals

Participant Response	T/SI	SI	DI	O
Pressure to raise achievement scores/accountability		x	x	
Lack of instructional support from district		x	x	
Non-supportive supervisor		x		
Too many changes in supervisors		x		
Supervisor not equipped to lead		x		
Use of bully tactics by supervisor		x		
Concerns with school safety/crisis plans				x
Lack of adequate funding/budget and no autonomy in spending			x	

Table 6

Cont.

Participant Response	T/SI	SI	DI	O
Having a very small school staff	x			
Need to market school/be good at public relations				x
No clear pathway to promotion			x	
Unrealistic expectations			x	
Losing connection to family due to long hours				x
Expectation to be connected 24/7 (email, phone)				x
Demanding parents				x
Lack of job security			x	
Huge demands in highly impacted and low-performing schools			x	
Loneliness of leadership position				x
Dealing with difficult teachers	x			
Allowing bad teachers to transfer within district	x			
Lack of assistance hiring new teachers	x			
Difficulty retaining teachers	x			
Having to replace/hire 50% staff	x			
Only administrator in building				x
New ideas not supported by supervisor/district		x	x	
Difficulty balancing personal/professional responsibilities				x
Lacked adequate experience as an assistant principal				x
Insufficient raises compared to increased workload			x	
Inadequate support getting rid of poor teachers	x			
Being in wrong school for personal skillset				x
Incompetent assistant principals	x			
District lacked clear communication to principals			x	
District forced professional development not aligned to school needs			x	
Changing demands of the principalship	x	x	x	

Table 6

Cont.

Participant Response	T/SI	SI	DI	O
Lack of district support with parental concerns		x	x	
Never receiving positive feedback from supervisor		x		
Pressure from dealing with exceptional children issues				x
Low community perception of school				x
Difficulty in motivating teachers to move students in a highly successful school	x			
Being publicly embarrassed by superintendent			x	
District hunting for problems in the school			x	
Issues that come with an outdated school facility				x
Health Issues (i.e. difficulty sleeping, stomach problems, headaches, etc.)				x

Note. T/SI = teacher and/or staffing issues; SI = supervisor issues; DI = district issues; O = other.

Supports Received by Principals Impacting Their Success

There were many supports that principals cited as being helpful to their role in leading schools. I coded 26 different supports that principals had received (Table 8). Ironically, some of the supports identified were also cited as stressors identified by principals in Table 7. Some supports that were identified were things that school leaders initiated to help them navigate the principalship. These included beliefs in making a difference for students, staying connected to the school community, having a supportive family and seeking assistance from colleagues. Willen's (2001) findings concur that strong principal support often comes from colleagues. Interviewees also noted the supports of accepting a job at the right kind of school and finding balance between personal and professional responsibilities. Therefore, many of the things principals

identified as supportive were not necessarily programs or things a district would give or assign to a new school leader, but things that effective leaders find on their own. Not being able to find balance in the principalship makes the job less manageable and the school leader would be more likely to leave, while finding balance increases his likelihood to remain according to factors identified by participants and confirmed by the research findings (Hammond et al., 2001).

Having a family and colleagues who are caring and encouraging can make a difference. Some principals felt they were being self-sufficient in finding their own supports. **"I would say I don't feel like I was lacking support because I just feel like I was fortunate enough to have really identified resources . . . because for me, I knew how to go and find those resources."** Some of the district-initiated supports that were most common included participating in mentoring programs, having instructional coaches in the building and distributing leadership responsibilities.

Support from Mentoring/Academy Programs

From the data collected, it appeared most principals received assistance from some form of mentorship during their early years in the principalship. This could have ranged from a peer in the district who was assigned to them, to a district retired principal or a mentor from outside the district. It also varied widely in how much contact they had with the mentor. Principals preferred mentors from outside their own district who could have an objective viewpoint and could say whatever they wanted. They also liked mentors who were experienced at the level at which they were assisting and who made consistent school visits, really getting to know the school culture. "I thought the second

model of mentoring worked well where you have somebody who's with you a little bit, a

little bit more." Two of the interviewees admitted their mentors were not assigned until

their supervisor felt like they were already failing, so they did not think the district

leadership recognized gains made while the mentor was there.

Support from Instructional Coaches/Consultants

Some schools, particularly those with extra funds, could hire their own

instructional coaches or consultants to assist teachers in their building. Sometimes these

coaches also provided additional support to the principal, spending time doing walk-

throughs and conferencing about instructional strengths, weaknesses, and next steps for

staff in the building. Another principal mentioned she would only hire the outside

consultant since he would not be playing games or politics by being unconnected to the

local leadership. Also, most schools had academic coaches who were employed by the

district or by their region. However, most principals felt these coaches were spread too

thin and schools did not receive adequate support from this model. Since principals are

instructional leaders in the building and they may not always have the expertise needed to

propel teachers forward, so having instructional assistance can be impactful. As one

principal shared, "The things that come up, the day-to-day things that come up,

particularly in impacted schools having somebody there that you can kind of process

through with is key." However, if the school does not have extra funding to purchase an

additional consultant or coaching time, this support model will not have as much impact.

Support from Distributing Leadership Responsibilities

Most principals who had longer tenure in their schools were able to recognize the need to delegate responsibilities to other stakeholders. Usually, these duties would go to their assistant principals, sometimes their curriculum facilitators, teacher leaders or office staff. Being able to distribute leadership was a recognized theme of support among participants and was supported by researchers as a strategy used by school leaders to improve instruction (Loder & Spillane, 2005; Louis & Miles, 1990; Ricken, 2007).

Therefore, they felt it was vitally important to have competent, trustworthy individuals to collaborate with the principal. One principal put it this way, "If I can't trust you then I end up taking on a whole lot of things that I could give to you, and this should be your ball to run with." Multiple school leaders felt having strong assistant principals was essential to success since that is where the largest number of duties are shared. Principals who were directed to other schools would sometimes use their bargaining chip to hire or bring their own administrative team with them.to the new school. Obviously, they felt a strong team would be important to their success in the new setting and they would be better able to distribute duties within the building.

Support from College Coursework/New Principal Academies

Some felt certain portions of their school level administrative certification programs from local colleges were helpful in navigating the basic responsibilities of the job. This coincides with the work of Martha McCarthy who believed university programs can affect school reform through their work with school leader preparation programs (as cited in Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). The aspect identified as most helpful from college

courses were the scenarios that students were given that simulated being the decision
maker, the principal. They also mentioned learning a lot from a law class and classes that
highlighted the nuts and bolts of leadership and day-to-day tasks. A full listing of the 26
supports school leaders identified as receiving are listed in Table 7.

Table 7

Supports Received by Principals Impacting Their Success

Participant Response	I	E
Strong belief system in ability to make a difference for students		x
Connection to the school community		x
Supportive Family		x
Supportive Colleagues	x	
Leading at school that is the right fit	x	
Maintaining a balance in personal and professional responsibilities		x
Prior experiences (assistant principal, counselor, academic coach, teaching)		x
New principal professional development	x	
Beginning first principalship mid-year	x	
Remaining passionate about the work	x	
Knowing resources available and how to access them	x	
Receiving support with doing budget	x	
Supportive office staff	x	
Supportive supervisor	x	
Educational leadership coursework	x	
Proximity of school to home		x
Assistance with hiring	x	
Being able to hire own administrative team	x	
Support received from resources in enrichment region	x	
Becoming a principal later in life		x
Distributing leadership responsibilities	x	
Support from outside consultants		x

Table 7

Cont.

Participant Response	I	E
Distributing leadership responsibilities	x	
Support from outside consultants		x
Mentoring programs	x	
New principal academy programs	x	
Instructional coaches	x	
College Coursework		x

Note. I = internal (related to job qualities, limitations and/or opportunities); E = external (outside of job qualities, limitations and/or opportunities)

Desired Supports Principals Did Not Receive

Principals freely discussed areas of support that they wish they had been able to have or had suggestions for their colleagues who may be dealing with similar issues. In general, principals wanted more assistance or guidance in dealing with managerial issues of running of school. As one research participant put it, "Moving into the principalship role, you know, it starts with you and it stops with you." Dealing with so many emails, knowing what forms go home at the beginning of the year, how to schedule open house, when you need the first fire drill are examples that were shared. Needing assistance with day-to-day needs was most likely to be mentioned by principals who had less experience.

Assistance with Managerial/Instructional Support

Participants felt the duties of running a school and being the instructional leader were overwhelming and that it was difficult to do both well. One participant shared a situation that occurred early on in her principalship.

I can remember calling, you know, and asking a question like what form do we use for this or that or I need to put someone on a permit, where are the directions that tell me what I'm supposed to do in the computer, all that stuff. I remember more than one department, multiple departments answering me with oh, you have a manual for that, and behind my desk I had cabinets underneath and three or four rows of, you know, shelving and they were just full of manuals . . . I'd turn around and I would look and it was more shelves than you have and I would be okay, it's in one of those manuals, alright now, alright, thank you, you know, and I would go on.

There was a consensus among most school leaders that having more instructional support would be beneficial. They would like to have had paid consultants in their buildings, more support from academic coaches in the district and better support from supervisors with instruction. Recognizing the importance of improving instruction concurs with the findings of Grogan and Andrews (as cited in Wong & Nicotera, 2007) who found the principal is the key player responsible for teacher development, a precursor to school improvement. One principal shared how he thinks it should be when requesting instructional assistance from his supervisor.

Your goal should be to support me in being successful in my school, and one of the things I need to be successful is to get Ms. Jones on the right track. Can you find the financial resources to make this happen? That's what I need.

Another principal shared a scenario of how obtaining instructional support should be handled.

What should happen is I should be able to call whomever, and say you know what, I—our biology scores are terrible and I need some help out here with biology. I'm struggling to get these ladies to, you know, work together and they should be able to come in and help me do that. It shouldn't be your biology scores suck, now what are you gonna do to get them up?

A veteran principal strongly believed that new principals need lots of support, but districts are not doing enough to assist them. "I was interested in new principal support, and the reason that I was interested in that is because, quite frankly, I had none." Multiple principals mentioned being part of a new principal cohort group that received some training, but they were mixed responses about them. One felt the focus groups were not a good model. Another felt it helped them understand the hiring process better, but no one mentioned this as a strong support for new school leaders. Almost all the participants felt their first few years in the principalship were the most difficult, so it makes sense to offer a supportive program to new leaders.

Support from Mentors

Along with offering support to new principals, several school leaders liked the mentor model, but felt strongly it is best if the mentor is not from the district is which the principal works. The mentor should be qualified by having a depth of experience and an ability to relate to people in positive manner, even those who may need correction. One principal spoke about the model.

> If you could take that model, the weekly model, maybe three days or, you know, or might be two days this week but three days the next week, but they if they were there a little bit more consistently, so you saw them several times throughout the month, if you could take that and really pair it with the support, I think that could be a very supportive model. You'd get a lot out of it.

Support with Hiring Teachers

A consistent request was obtaining more assistance with hiring good teachers as well as support with getting rid of the inadequate teachers. One principal shared her strong beliefs in this.

> It has to be one of the biggest contributors to the breakdown of the education system. When we let, in our profession, we let individuals remain in our profession that are ineffective, unprofessional, that in any other business would have been fired, I'm all for letting somebody improve, giving them time, you know, whatever, but at that point, if they're still not effective in doing what's best for kids they need to go, and allowing people to remain in this profession and either moving them around or just putting up with them, to me is the biggest crime.

A principal can only make a recommendation for a teacher to be non-renewed. The school leader must also garner the support from the human resources department and sometimes their direct supervisor. Better prepared teachers can work toward gaining better learning outcomes for students.

> I don't care if you're in a barn or you're in the shiniest, gilded private school in this nation, if you don't have a good teacher in front of those kids, it doesn't matter where you are, that is the most important thing in education, and if as principals, I feel like my most important job, besides safety, is to put the best teacher in front of these kids that I can find, and when I am hindered or prohibited from doing that, that frustrates me more than anything else going on in education today.

A few principals spoke about receiving transfer teachers who were already having issues at their previous school, yet they were passed on to another school and another classroom. Principals want to staff their schools with competent and caring teachers because "they are the most important people in the building."

Being Able to Hire Assistant Principals

A common thread among principals interviewed was they desired the support of being able to hire their own building level leadership team, particularly the assistant principals, but it could also include office staff or incoming teaching staff. Even when principals moved to different schools, several made a request to hire their own team. They were consistent in the belief of building a strong leadership team. As one participant commented, "The things that come up, the day-to-day things that come up, having somebody you can process that through with is key." I learned from the work of Douglas Reeves (2009) and researchers Leithwood, Janti, and Aitken (2006) that the two largest factors affecting student achievement are teacher and principal quality. Therefore, it confirms the need identified by principals to have competent assistant principals in their schools.

Other support ideas that were proposed included setting aside time for principals to talk and share with their colleagues and creating a non-threatening environment for professional growth. During the data collection from the interviews, 12 areas of desired supports were identified as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Desired Supports Principals Did Not Receive

Participant Response	S/D	P
Support with day-to-day needs/practical support (managerial)	x	
Assistance with beginning of year rituals	x	
Support for struggling teachers		x
Support from Mentors	x	

Table 8

Cont.

Participant Response	S/D	P
Support with hiring teachers	x	
Being able to hire assistant principals		x
Help in dismissing inadequate teachers/assistant principals	x	
Time/opportunity to collaborate with colleagues		x
More assistance with supporting instruction	x	
Weekly visits from out-of-district mentors	x	
Supervisor that is invested in growth/success of the principal	x	
Literacy team		x
More time to affect change/raise scores		x
Need for additional tools to support instructional and cultural leadership		x

Note. S/D = supports from supervisor and/or district; P = supports from procedures or programs.

Summary

The interviews with the current and former principals revealed factors that influenced them to leave or stay at their schools. Supports that principals received were analyzed as well as the major stressors that occurred with the responsibilities of being the school leader. Also, I was able to gather data on the supports that principals desired to have in their leadership roles, but did not receive. Some revelations concerning the general stressors of the job were expected, while other parts of their experiences yielded unexpected results. In the next chapter I make recommendations from the information garnered in the study and share a few personal reflections.

CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

There were four research questions for this study on why principals leave and why principals stay:

- What factors influence principals to leave (or stay in) their assigned schools?

- What are the perceived stressors of school principals and do they impact their remaining at, or departing from, their schools?

- What are the supports school principals receive and do they impact them to remain in their schools?

- What are the supports principals perceive that they need but do not receive, and does not receiving them impact them to leave their schools?

I would like to summarize what I have learned about the research questions after conducting the study and analyzing the data from the interview participants. First, if a school leader enters the principalship with a desire to move on to district leadership, I believe he or she may be using the principal position as a stepping stone to the central office. It is important that someone with a goal of district leadership realizes the importance of understanding the principal role, but it causes the school, staff and students to deal with more transitions if the tenure is short and this can hurt the capacity of the school to grow students as quickly. I believe other principals leave the principalship due to the stress and pressures they experience from the myriad of responsibilities. There was

consensus among principals that the job can be overwhelming. A lack of support from district leadership appears to be one of the prime factors to cause stress and not meet with success. However, I think the district moves toward dismissal with school leaders due to their belief in the ineffectiveness of the leadership for that particular school.

Principals that stay in their assigned schools fell into two categories. There were school leaders who had remained at one school and those who had worked at multiple schools. I learned that most principals who routinely changed schools did so with the influence of district leadership. I believe districts informally identified them as turnaround principals and moved them to new schools at times when a strong leader was critical to the success of the school. I do believe this created some stress in their work lives, but they had a skillset that allowed them to overcome the stressors and access the resources and support needed to succeed. Principals staying in one school only, for the most part, were new in their careers and I believe will move eventually. The one school leader that remained at her school for almost a decade is a rarity in today's schools and I would surmise that this trend is not likely to change.

I was surprised to learn of the variety of specific issues that brought stress to the school leaders. They fell in major categories of raising achievement or scores, teacher problems, supervisor issues and lack of instructional support. It was obvious that some principals possessed capabilities to work through the stressors. They either knew how to access supports for the issues or could preserve through the problem until it was resolved. It was common that principals who struggled with a particular stressor did not have a

supportive leader. However, having a non-supportive supervisor did not guarantee dire struggles or failure, but it appeared to increase the likelihood of not meeting with success.

The supports principals received that seemed most common were assistance with direct supervision, mentorship and instructional supports. Since the main job of school leaders is to be the instructional leader in the school, being able to identify and locate resources to improve instruction is key. Many times, the supervisor of the leader has control on how many resources, staff and funding, that one may receive. I believe this is why having an experienced, invested supervisor, who has consistent contact with principals is imperative to their success.

Lastly, I noticed that the supports that principals desired and did not receive were basic supports that most districts could put in place. Yet, I wondered why the school leaders had not received what they felt they needed to lead with success. Although the supports were not unique ones, the inability to implement them may have been due to dwindling education budgets and the inability of supervisors to recognize what principals were lacking in their skillset. I think districts will continue to expect principals to be successful in a time of high accountability, lower budgets and changing demands. District and state leaders need to give the school leaders time to affect the change and the funding, staff and resources needed to make it happen.

Summary of Themes

My initial inquiry in this narrative study was to determine the factors that influence principals to leave or stay in their assigned schools. In addition, stressors, supports and supports desired, but not received by principals, were identified and

analyzed. This data was reported in relation to the research questions. However, as I was conducting the interviews, four themes emerged that were not directly related to the research questions: the importance of balance in the principalship, the impact of health issues on principals, the rewards of being a school leader and advice to other principals.

Being able to achieve balance in the principalship was a universal theme among the nine principals interviewed. It did not matter the gender, race, experience level or type of school the leader worked in, they still dealt with the challenge of balancing personal and professional duties. One of the successful veteran principals admitted she wished someone would have forced her to pay more attention to family. Almost no one felt they were successfully balancing and many expressed guilt. One principal succinctly shared what many felt as she thought she could be a good wife/mother or a good principal, but not both at the same time. The reactions of the school leaders to the issue of balance, should alert prospective school leaders to an area that needs to be a priority.

Secondly, the impact of health issues on principals was pervasive and the reactions of participants were more surprising to me than any other information that was shared. All nine interviewees identified at least one health-related issue they believed was a direct result of stress on the job. These health issues varied, from getting headaches and possessing poor eating habits to high blood pressure, stomach issues, shingles and depression. Several admitted to taking medications to treat the conditions and in a couple situations, the medical doctors of the principals predicted some of their chronic health conditions would likely disappear once they left the principalship. This lets us know how school leaders may be attempting to hide the pressures and stress, but it is being released

with physical and mental health needs. Only two of the nine candidates mentioned trying to exercise consistently. It is important for school leaders to take notice of their own physical needs including getting the proper nutrition, exercising and making time to chat with a supportive colleague that can lead to a healthier lifestyle.

Next, the rewards of being a school leader emerged as a common theme and participants were happy to share the positive stories and successes they made in their schools. The pride in some of their accomplishments was evident and they were anxious to share. Principals were just as excited about seeing a child grow academically or connecting with a former dropout, who had returned to finish his schooling, as they were excited about raising test scores. Many of the rewards were intangibles, like making a staff member's job easier, building relationships with the community and seeing the results of hard work. No one mentioned salaries or bonuses as being a reward; yet, could it be recognized as a reward if it were significant?

The last theme identified was that of advice that school leaders would give to new principals or advice they wish someone would have given to them. This included the best time to take over a new school, establishing relationships with others, hiring own administrative or support team and distributing leadership responsibilities. Two principals began their first principalship mid-year and believed it may have had a significant impact on their initial success at their schools. Learning the strengths of staff members and getting them connected to the school's vision was an asset as the relationship building helped to motivate staff. Multiple staff members identified the importance of having a competent, loyal support team, usually made up of assistant principals and support

personnel in order to function well as a team. When school leaders are able to distribute leadership responsibilities, it creates a better balance in the principalship role. Their advice can be beneficial to novice and experienced school leaders.

Recommendations for Aspiring/Current Principals

One of the successful, veteran principals who I interviewed shared the advice she gave to an intern, "I told him this is an incredibly lonely job, it's a very lonely job." I found her comment to be ironic in that she was working in a high school at the time, with a large student body and staff. Why would she describe it as lonely? Maybe she agreed with Houston (2008), as he too believed school leadership could be a lonely profession. However, principals know they can make the world a better place using their strong leadership qualities in schools. "So it is lonely at the top, but that is where you get the best view" (Houston, 2008, p. 35).

Undoubtedly, the self-satisfaction principals receive from their work can make the view and the loneliness worth the effort. Recent research on school leaders conducted by Day and Gurr (2014), concluded that principals hold one of the most important and rewarding jobs in our society. They may not receive positive feedback from their district leaders, but continuing in the leadership position long-term tended to bring more satisfaction as they were able to persevere through challenges. Novice principals should give themselves time to learn the job responsibilities and allow their passion for students to carry them through the tough days. Veteran principals should concentrate on successes too, even as they gain experience in handling sensitive dilemmas.

This study revealed that all school leaders deal with stress on the job. Some stressors are innate to the position, such as accountability related to achievement scores, continual implementation of new initiatives, handling dwindling budgets, pressure to satisfy all stakeholders, acting as school safety expert, disciplinarian, school marketing representative, and instructional leader. Additionally, most will experience stress related to balancing personal and professional responsibilities as well as health concerns. It is vital to remember that daily stress that is short lived is normal, but when it continues, it can turn into distress. School leaders who suffer from unrelenting stress are candidates for burnout (Brock & Grady, 2002).

- Learn to identify the factors that trigger stress and learn strategies to manage them

- Take care of yourself, beginning with what you eat and how much you sleep.

- Find ways to maintain your energy and motivation, whether this is exercise, church, professional development

- Find whatever you need to keep yourself healthy and at peace.

- Seek out colleagues whom you can share your challenges and that will support and encourage you.

It is important to remember what Fullan (2001) stated, "Leaders are not born, they are nurtured" (p. 131). Principal leaders need support and encouragement throughout their careers in order to be successful and balanced. If you are a school principal and you are not receiving the support you need, you should seek it out on your own.

Recommendations for School Districts

Local school districts should audit the support and services given to principals. Anonymous surveys could be used each year and principals could rate the supports given by their direct supervisors, curriculum coaches, and other district departments. In addition, the principals could request assistance in areas of need. Districts should keep detailed data on departure rates of leaders, including transfers, early retirement, ill health, and pre-mature exit from the school or district. Officially tracking the movement of principals will indicate deficiencies in the district's ability to retain quality leadership staff.

Districts should offer quality professional counseling services, which are easily accessible, and confidential for all school leaders. This is one way principals could learn strategies to deal with stresses that come from the expectations of the position. Another program that can easily be implemented is to allow assistant principals to become interim leaders while principals take a short sabbatical for professional development or rest to re-energize and rejuvenate. This opportunity would also help assistant principals or interns to handle more decision-making and extend their skill set in leading schools. Districts could look at this group of educators for filling future principal openings as it would be a form of growing their own school leadership. "Principals matter to the academic success of students and districts should therefore take a strong hand in selecting and training their leaders and cultivating their continuing success" (Mendels & Mitgang, 2013, p. 28). Therefore, good principals need to be kept on the job (Potter, 2001).

Obviously, increasing local salary supplements for all school leaders would be popular among principals. Since the most highly impacted schools struggle to keep principals long-term, districts could offer yearly bonuses for working there or they could offer a larger financial incentive for staying multiple years (five or more). Schools and school reform efforts cannot be successful unless high-quality principals stay at the same school for extended periods of time (Fuller et al., 2008). Although I think money can be an incentive, I also think districts could offer more economical rewards, such as free gym memberships and fitness or nutrition coaching. Having twice yearly raffles, offering free weekend getaways would show school leaders that the district recognizes their workload and the need to relax.

Districts should have a detailed staff development plan for all school leaders, no matter the years in the principalship. So much is expected of principals who face changes in federal, state and local mandates. Those in the first three to five years should receive the most assistance, since this is the critical period for all new leaders. I agree with Fullan (2001), "The lessons for developing leaders in a culture of change are more tortoise-like than hare-like because they involve slow learning in context over time" (p. 121). All principals need time to affect change in schools and they need to feel supported all along the way. Assigning experienced mentors to assist them for multiple years would be beneficial. Mentors should spend time on campus weekly and they could advise on curricular and managerial concerns on a consistent basis. The mentors should have good relationship-building skills in order to form an alliance of trust with the school leaders

being mentored. Having consistent leadership is important in schools to keep momentum

moving for current initiatives.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

As state legislatures initiate new policies for schools, politicians should fund the

reforms as well. Continuing to issue mandates without the funding to implement them is

lunacy. This would carry over to initiatives at the federal level as well. Unfunded reforms

are not effective for students and schools and place undue pressure on principals.

Both state and federal policymakers need to lessen the accountability on schools

that require so much testing. Students have too many standardized tests and school

leaders are feeling the pressure to raise achievement levels. Being under scrutiny to raise

test scores was one of the most common stressors among principals. School leaders care

about their students and they want to promote an educated citizenry, not just raise scores

on a piece of paper. Policymakers in North Carolina need to change the format of the

School Report Card that currently uses a high proficiency score and low growth score for

students and schools. This has resulted in the appearance that schools in poor

communities are failing. Actually, educators could be growing students more in those

schools, but the grading system does not reflect this and, thus, is unfair. School leaders at

these low performing schools face stricter mandates and larger workloads due to the

ratings in this system.

I want to see our policymakers implement pilot programs in designated public

schools where schooling can be redesigned and school leaders have more autonomy to

lead them in new ways. We need to fundamentally change the way things are done in

schools. Supporting systematic school design can be key to meeting the needs in an ever-changing society. Bring school principals to the table to help design and plan for schooling in selected pilot schools. The models that are most effective can be expanded on a larger scale. Principals should have the authority to redesign school structures including staff organization, pedagogical practices and decision making.

Lastly, policymakers should work closely with university preparation programs to influence school reform. State and federal policymakers could audit the effectiveness of educational leadership programs to determine the most effective ones and what can be altered to increase their ability to train school leaders. Audits from the state and federal level that measure the retention and turnover rates of school leaders would also be effective. If local districts are already using an audit format and they are extended to the state and federal levels, local school systems could compare their results with districts experiencing higher retention rates and implement similar support systems.

Suggestions for Future Research

In the field of education research, teacher retention has been the focus of a myriad of studies and research. However, principal retention studies and research are quite rare. Since principals and teachers hold the most influential positions in schools, more research is warranted. Future studies could include a wider group of participants, particularly including former school principals, to identify additional reasons for why they left the principalship. Some school leaders who move on to the central office may be using the principalship as a stepping stone to district positions. In addition, if surveys could be administered as opposed to interviews, a large-scale study could be done to determine if

gender, race, ethnicity, or area of the state or country hold bias, by providing differential results, against any group of school leaders.

Researcher Reflections about the Study

I want to give an update on the status of the study participants and the career changes that have taken place for some. There were nine participants in the study, two of whom had left the principalship. One took a position at the district level while the other one chose to become an assistant principal and both of them remain in those positions. Four other interviewees had stayed in the principalship, but had led two or more schools during their tenure. Two of the four principals have retired and a third one has moved into a district leadership position; thus, only one continues to lead the same school he was in at the time of the interview. The three remaining principals had only led one school thus far in their careers. Two of the three who had been at one school have stayed at those schools. The third principal has moved out of the district to accept a position at a different level of schooling.

The purpose of this study was to investigate principal turnover to determine the perceived reasons why principals leave their positions, or why they remain. My study sought to address the experiences of these individuals, telling their stories of why they leave their assigned schools, including their needs or stressors, and describing their external supports they perceive causing them to stay. As was depicted in the conceptual framework, there was a complexity of factors that related to whether school principals remain or leave their schools. I was able to identify stressors that make the job difficult, as well as identify supports principals did receive or supports they desired, but did not

get. Using the qualitative research of a narrative study allowed me to tell the stories or experiences of multiple school leaders in central North Carolina.

Being an administrator for almost 16 years, I was keenly interested in this study and the factors influencing local school leaders. I attempted to withhold any personal bias or opinions that I held while conducting this study. I was intentional in sticking to the interview questions during the sessions and kept my conversation with the participants to a minimum. I learned so much about what motivated the strong, veteran school leaders and I learned about the stresses common to all principals. I have read and re-read the interviews many, many times and yet, I found more insight into the work of the principal each time I read them again. The voices of the school leaders were the most important part of the study and they need to be heard again and again. I am hopeful that this will enlighten educators, legislators and other policy makers to be more open to their voices in the future. Listening to the needs of principals and giving them the support they need will make a difference for students. Being able to retain quality school leaders for longer periods will be supportive to schools and to students.

Conclusions

My respect and admiration for all those serving as school leaders only grew due to my work in this study. Principals are a dedicated, self-less group of intrinsically motivated leaders who believe they can make a difference for students every day. I found this quote during my research and feel it is key to the future of our educational system. If we work together to support principals, we will be supporting our schools and our children.

> If we want our children to learn, our schools must learn, And, if we want our schools to learn, our nations must be prepared to learn as well. In educational reform, this is not the time to circle the wagons, but to widen the circles of learning and influence where the world grows stronger by how its people learn to improve together. (Malone, 2013, p. 15)

We must all care about the future of our next generation and we need to learn what we can do together to have a positive impact on our school leaders. Why? Our principals want to make a difference and are willing to face a complexity of issues to help, even one child, overcome obstacles to a good education and career. I would like to conclude this research study with a quote from one of the interviewees from the study and her belief in making a difference.

> I think people stay in it (principalship) because they love children and they want to make a difference and they keep hoping that, you know, all those little—that whole starfish story, you know, the little boy going down the beach and, you know, all these starfish are laying there dying and he picks up one, throws it in, picks up another one, the man comes along and says, man what are you doing, there's no way you can save all these starfish and he says well, I might not can make a difference for all of them, but I just made a difference for that one, and he throws it in the ocean, so I feel like that part of it is what keeps you in it, knowing that, you know, you can't save them all, but by golly, we're gonna try and you do save a few along the way.

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