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High school dropouts are an ongoing concern in North Carolina. Although improvements have been made in recent years, 13,488 North Carolina students did not complete high school in 2011–2012 (Public Schools of North Carolina Consolidated Report, 2011–2012). This research study seeks to identify common, specific characteristics, strategies, and techniques that effective elementary school administrators demonstrate that they perceive increases the learning of at risk students. A multisite case study was implemented utilizing multiple interviews, observations, and document analysis in order to provide an accurate portrayal of actual characteristics, strategies, and techniques employed by different elementary administrators who have been proven to be successful with at risk students. Data from four elementary principals was triangulated in order to identify common characteristics, behaviors, and strategies for each of the principals identified as successful with at-risk elementary students.

Presentation of findings is reported through a description of common perceptions of dropouts and instructional and non-instructional perspectives that positively impact at-risk students. Common principal perceptions of at risk students include low academics, lack of parental support, lack of vision/motivation, and limited or negative home environment. Elementary school administrators' instructional perspectives that positively impacted at-risk students included areas such as

curriculum focus, instructional monitoring, high expectations for staff and students, and specific instructional strategies. Elementary school administrators' non-instructional perspectives that positively impacted at-risk students were relationships with all stakeholders, open communication, and motivational, non-instructional activities. The intent of this study was to provide educational leaders and preparation programs perceived characteristics, strategies, and techniques that were common among elementary principals who were identified as being effective with at-risk students. As a supervisor of elementary principals, my research has focused on the most important qualities of effective administrators who strive to be successful with at-risk students.

WHAT DO SUCCESSFUL ELEMENTARY LEADERS PERCEIVE
THAT THEY DO THAT PROMOTES ACADEMIC SUCCESS
OF AT-RISK STUDENTS?

by

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Carl Lashley
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Dedicated to my Daddy,
who always believed in his “Norma Jean”

“My father gave me the greatest gift anyone
could give another person, he believed in me.” –Jim Valvano

APPROVAL PAGE

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Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: The potential for greatness lives within each of us. —Wilma Rudolph

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT	1
Statement of Problem	6
Significance.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Overview of Subsequent Chapters.....	9
Chapter II.....	9
Chapter III.....	10
Chapter IV	11
Chapter V	11
Chapter VI	12
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	13
Characteristics of High School Dropouts.....	14
Individual Domain.....	16
Family Domain	22
School Domain	25
Community Domain.....	28
Effective School Leaders	30
Strategic Leadership	34
Instructional Leadership	38
Cultural Leadership	47
Human Resource Leadership.....	50
Managerial Leadership.....	54
External Development Leadership	57
Micro-political Leadership.....	60
Principal Perceptions of At-Risk Students.....	62
Summary	63
III. METHODOLOGY	66
Conceptual Frameworks	66

Research Questions.....	70
Research Tradition.....	70
Selection of Participants.....	72
Participants' Schools.....	76
Data Collection.....	80
Interviews	80
Observations	81
Document Analysis.....	82
Data Analysis	83
Researcher Subjectivity	84
Trustworthiness.....	86
Summary.....	88
IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS: PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS AND INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES	89
Principals' Perceptions and Instructional Perspectives	89
Principal Perceptions	90
Low Academics	91
Lack of Parental Support.....	91
Lack of Vision or Purpose.....	92
Limited or Negative Environment	92
Instructional Perspectives	94
Curriculum Focus	94
Instructional Monitoring	109
High Expectations of Staff and Students	115
Instructional Strategies Used with At-Risk Students	122
Summary.....	124
V. RESEARCH FINDINGS: NON-INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES	125
Non-Instructional Perspectives.....	125
Relationships.....	126
Communication	142
Non-Instructional Strategy Used with At-Risk Students	150
Summary.....	153
VI. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.....	155
Research Questions.....	156

Elementary School Leaders' Perceptions	157
Instructional Perspectives and Strategies	158
Non-Instructional Perspectives and Strategies	164
Implications	171
Principals.....	171
Policymakers.....	173
Researchers.....	174
Limitations.....	175
Future Implications.....	176
REFERENCES.....	181
APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) NOTIFICATION	197
APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM	198
APPENDIX C. PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS	203
APPENDIX D. PRINCIPAL OBSERVATION PROTOCOL.....	206
APPENDIX E. INSTRUCTIONAL AND NON-INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EFFECTIVE ELEMENTARY ADMINISTRATORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS	207

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Factors Associated with School Dropout: Domains and Sub-Domains.....	15
Table 2. Student Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnic Diversity for 2011	17
Table 3. Locale Codes of Participants' Schools.....	73
Table 4. Characteristics of Participants	75
Table 5. Demographic Data of Participants' Schools by NCES Locale Code	76
Table 6. Student Enrollments by Race/Ethnic Diversity for Participants' Schools.....	78
Table 7. Accountability Data Reported from 2011–2012 NC School Report Cards.....	79

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. Initial Framework	66
Figure 2. Characteristics of At-Risk Students	67
Figure 3. Primary Indicators of Effective School Administrators	68
Figure 4. Primary Indicators of Effective School Administrators Divided into Categories.....	69

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Leadership is practiced not so much in words as in attitude and in actions.
—Harold S. Geneen

Enter most Kindergarten classrooms and you can feel the excitement and anticipation of eager five-year-olds playing and learning alongside their peers. Children are scattered throughout the room working individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Some children are with an adult at the kidney-shaped table playing a shape and color sorting game while others work alongside their peers with toy cars and signs constructing a road with bridges and tunnels in the block center. Two children are creating a masterpiece with paint at the art easel while others are using magnifying glasses to discover the differences and similarities of various seashells. In the reading corner, children are cuddled in beanbag chairs sharing a book while others are stretched out in the floor listening to a story while following along in a big book. Others are working on letter-sound recognition at the computer station as they sing along with the computer. At the writing center, children are working with an adult identifying the letters in their name and writing them proudly in varied colors. Cheerful chatter is heard. Everywhere children are happy and engaged while purposeful learning is taking place. Students are happy to be “in school” and are learning.

Fast-forward ten years; many of these same eager-to-learn children are dropping out of high school. The natural love of learning and overwhelming curiosity has drifted, and students have become disengaged. National statistics indicate that of the students in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of the “1988 eighth-grade cohort, 20%—about 587,000 students—dropped out of high school at least once” (Hurst, Kelly, & Princiotta, 2004, p. 1). However, 63% of the NELS students who dropped out of school did earn a high school credential either through returning to school or earning a General Educational Development (GED) certificate by 2000 (Hurst et al., 2004). In 2010, U.S. Department of Education reported that 7.4% students between the ages of 16 and 24 years old dropped out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The North Carolina State Board Policy HSP-Q-001 defines a dropout as “any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school” (Public Schools of North Carolina Consolidated Report, 2010–2011, p. 113). Students are considered as dropouts if they were enrolled in school the previous year but were not enrolled on day 20 of the current school year (Public Schools of North Carolina Consolidated Report, 2010–2011). North Carolina’s dropout rate for 2011–2012 school year decreased to 3.01% from 3.43% in 2010–2011 (Public Schools of North Carolina Consolidated Report, 2011–2012). In a State Department of Public Instruction News Release on March 3, 2011, State Superintendent June Atkinson stated that North Carolina educators have

made progress in keeping students in class and on track for graduation as evidenced in the reduced dropout rate; however, educators must keep the positive momentum going so all students graduate college or career-ready (Public Schools of North Carolina Newsroom, 2011).

Economic times are hard and lucrative careers are very competitive (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statics, 2012). Public schools must prepare all students to be able to compete and be successful in a difficult economic period. A higher percentage of students who have dropped out of high school are unemployed compared to students who have earned a high school credential (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). In 2009, dropouts between the ages of 18 and 67 who had not completed high school earned a median annual income of \$25,000 compared to people of the same age bracket who had at least a high school certificate or equivalent who earned approximately \$43,000 annually (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal Ramani, 2011). During the same timeframe, approximately 3.0 million 16 through 24-year-olds living in the United States were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential (Chapman et al., 2011).

There are societal and economic costs associated with high dropout rates. According to the American Psychological Association (2013), "Dropouts are far more likely to experience reduced job and income opportunities, chronic unemployment, incarceration, or require government assistance than the rest of the population." Although the national dropout rates have trended downward

between 1972 and 2010 from 14.6 % to 7.4 % (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011), large numbers of students are still choosing to leave school. Research has shown that “dropping out is often the culmination of a long-term process of disengagement that begins in the earliest grades” (United States General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 15). Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) concur with the view of “dropout as a long-term developmental process” (p. 764).

Current educational reforms in the United States require that the stakeholders in the public school community help all students graduate (Brown, 2010). *A Blueprint for Reform Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* from the U.S. Department of Education sends the clear expectation to all stakeholders to take action that results in every student completing high school both college and career ready (Brown, 2010). A student does not just decide to drop out of school when he turns 16. Student dropouts are the responsibility of all stakeholders including policymakers, parents, community members, and especially educators from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Identifying what happens to the enthusiastic pre-kindergarten student in the years before he drops out of high school is a troubling and far too common scenario. Acknowledging a decline in students’ enthusiasm and discovering what educational leaders can do to ensure students stay engaged in school is a necessary reality to reducing school dropout.

Having worked with at-risk students directly or indirectly throughout my educational career as a pre-school teacher, elementary school teacher, assistant principal, principal, and central office administrator, I have a special interest in students at risk of failure. Numerous factors, including poverty and lack of parental involvement, may influence a student's success or lack of success in school (Epstein, 2001; Epstein and Sheldon, 2006; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Jensen, 2009). Students from all economic backgrounds are at risk of dropping out; however, low-income students are more likely to be affected (Balfanz, Hornig Fox, Bridgeland, & McNaught, 2009).

Public schools are charged with providing a free education for all children regardless of external factors while facilitating student success through high school graduation. Every school administrator from elementary to high school has the responsibility to lead a productive, engaging school environment that will help every student maximize his potential as a 21st century learner. Some school administrators are more successful with at-risk students than others, as indicated by performance of the economically disadvantaged subgroups in comparison to their non-economically disadvantaged peers. However, students who are economically disadvantaged "come from a family with an annual income below a level which is based on low-income thresholds according to family size published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, adjusted annually for changes in the Consumer Price Index" (Medical College of Wisconsin, 2012, p. 1).

Statement of Problem

Significant research exists on high school dropouts (Balfanz et al., 2009; Belfield & Levin, 2007). Dropping out of high school adversely impacts not only the student but society as a whole. “Dropouts earn less money and are more frequently unemployed than graduates” (United States General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 4). Students who drop out of school are three times as likely as high school completers who do not go on to college to be welfare recipients (United States General Accounting Office, 2002). Also, 30% of federal and 40% of state prison inmates are high school dropouts (Wirt et al., 1998). These situations impose a considerable cost on all levels of government.

Reports such as *The Silent Epidemic* (2006) and *On the Front Lines of School* (2009) focus on who is dropping out of school, why they choose to drop out of school, and what schools can do to prevent dropouts. Research shows the high cost of high school dropouts not only for the individuals but also for the countries in which they live (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). To reduce high school dropout rates, schools must raise academic expectations; improve communication and collaboration among teachers, parents and students; redesign the traditional high school setting; and improve teacher quality (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004; Rumberger, 2001). Most recommendations surrounding dropouts center on secondary education as this is

when students exit school. However, high school dropout is a problem that has implications for educators from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Risk factors for dropping out of school exist in all life domains--personal, family, school, community, and peer relations. As these risk factors accumulate, the higher the possibility for a student to drop out of school (Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). Dropping out of school is a decision that students make after several years of disengagement (United States General Accounting Office, 2002). Literature on school dropouts has been available for many years and is aligned (Alexander et al., 2001; Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Rumberger, 2001). The characteristics of dropouts as well as the strategies implemented to prevent dropouts have been essentially the same for years yet the problem continues (Alexander et al., 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2009; Hammond et al., 2007; Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2001). Therefore, there is a need to examine the dropout problem through a different lens.

Limited research is available concerning the role elementary schools play in high school dropouts. Research is also limited on the practices of elementary school leaders that make a difference in the academic performance and motivation of students who are at risk of high school dropout.

All schools have students who are at risk of early school dropout; however, some schools face a greater challenge because of the increased numbers of at-risk students they serve. Some schools are very successful in promoting student growth as measured by end of grade tests with students at

risk of school dropout. Why are these at-risk elementary students demonstrating success? What is happening in the elementary setting that is enabling student success? School dropout is perceived to be a high school phenomenon; however, school dropout begins much earlier than high school. Although many stakeholders share in the responsibility of educating today's youth, the focus of this study is on the practices of the elementary school leader that may contribute to the academic success of at-risk students. This study identifies perceived strategies and techniques that are common among successful elementary administrators and that promote high rates of success for at-risk students.

Significance

The significance of this study is the ability to look at the problem of early school dropout from a different perspective—through an elementary lens. Through this research study, the opportunity exists to determine common, specific characteristics, strategies, and techniques that effective elementary school administrators demonstrate that increase the learning of at-risk students. This study will benefit other educational leaders by providing insight into the types of strategies and techniques school administrators can utilize to make a significant difference in learning and success of at-risk students. This information will be shared with all participants. Another benefit of this study is the opportunity for the interviewees to personally reflect on their craft.

Upon completion of the research study, elementary school leaders will be provided specific characteristics and processes to help at-risk students succeed.

In addition, universal characteristics of successful school leaders will be identified that are perceived to be beneficial across grade levels and student populations.

Research Questions

This study will investigate the following research questions:

- What are the leadership beliefs and practices that are in place in elementary schools where at-risk students are successful?
- How do elementary school leaders perceive at-risk students?
- What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?
- What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of non-instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter II

Much research exists on high school dropouts (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz et al., 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland, DiLulio, & Morison, 2006; Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992; Rumberger, 2001; Schargel, 2004) and effective school leaders (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; The Wallace

Foundation, 2011). This chapter provides an overview of the literature on both topics--high school dropouts and effective school leaders.

The *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs Report* (Hammond et al., 2007) classifies the factors associated with school dropout into four areas or domains: individual, family, school and community. The portion of the literature review that is focused on school dropouts is organized within these four domains.

Parrett and Budge (2012) concluded in their research of high poverty/high performing schools that significant gains are not sustained without effective school leaders. Although the impact on student achievement may be indirect, research has shown that principal leadership does make an instructional difference for students (Leithwood et al., 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012). The second part of the literature review focuses on some of the research-based practices within each of the seven leadership strands in the current School Executive Evaluation Process (NCSBE/McREL, 2008) in order to connect the role of the leader with motivating and improving academic achievement of at-risk children.

Chapter III

The qualitative methodology used to conduct this study is presented in this chapter. A multisite case study was used to gain a better understanding of characteristics, strategies, and techniques that are common among successful elementary administrators and promote high rates of success for students at risk of dropping out. Multiple interviews, observations, and document analysis were

used in order to provide an accurate portrayal of actual characteristics, strategies, and techniques employed by different successful elementary administrators. A brief explanation of participating principals and schools precedes the data analysis. Because the researcher was a successful elementary administrator with an at-risk population, this chapter concludes with acknowledgement of the researcher's subjectivity and attempts to increase the trustworthiness of the results.

Chapter IV

Principals' perceptions of at-risk students and instructional perspectives that positively influence academic success of at-risk students are discussed in Chapter IV. The first section seeks to identify common perceptions or ideas about students who are likely to drop out of school early, according to the principals in this study who have been identified as effective with at-risk students. The second category of data identified and discussed in this chapter is instructional perspectives that positively impact at-risk students.

Chapter V

Chapter V continues the data analysis by focusing on the non-instructional perspectives that are likely to positively influence academic success of at-risk students. Non-instructional perspectives are practices that are not directly associated with teaching and learning but are common among principals in this study who have been identified as effective with at-risk students.

Chapter VI

The final chapter discusses findings related to the perceptions and instructional and non-instructional perspectives of effective school leaders as it relates to promoting success of at-risk students. Implications, as they apply to practitioners, local and state policymakers, and the professional community of educational leadership, are discussed. Study limitations and future practical implementations of the research are offered.

The subsequent chapter provides an overview of the literature on high school dropouts and effective school leaders. Having a good understanding of who dropout students are and why they drop out of school and research-based best practices of effective school leaders will better prepare the researcher for identifying characteristics and strategies of effective elementary school leaders who are successful with at-risk students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
—William Butler Yeats

The focus of this research study is to identify perceptions and behaviors of successful elementary school leaders that contribute to the academic success of at-risk students. In order to determine what will prevent dropouts, the researcher must first understand the characteristics of school dropouts and why students choose to drop out of school. Also, one must explore the behaviors and characteristics of effective administrators that contribute to student success and prevent school dropout. The literature review will examine the characteristics of high school dropouts including the reasons students drop out of school and effective school leaders research focusing on what good school leaders do to promote student success and prevent school dropout.

Even though school dropout is not a new phenomenon, preventing school dropout is a current topic of interest. A recent article in *Education Week* describes how Montgomery County Public School, located in the suburbs of Washington, is utilizing a longitudinal data program to build an early-warning system to identify future dropouts as early as the second semester of first grade (Sparks, 2013). Such systems can be used to target interventions based on

characteristics of students who have failed academically and dropped out of school. Characteristics such as chronic absenteeism, severe disciplinary infractions, and failure in reading and/or math are used as red flags to indicate possible dropout potential (Sparks, 2013). Montgomery County's early warning system is not currently being used to track individual students but rather is changing the way administrators are discussing students at risk of academic failure (Sparks, 2013). This example from Montgomery County Public School validates the connection between effective elementary administrators identifying possible dropouts and targeting interventions. The following section discusses the many characteristics of high school dropouts.

Characteristics of High School Dropouts

Multiple factors are associated with the likelihood of becoming a high school dropout. "No one single factor can be accurately used to predict who is at risk of dropping out" (Hammond et al., 2007). However, when considering a combination of multiple risk factors, then dropout predications are increased. "Dropouts are not a homogeneous group. Many subgroups of students can be identified based on when the risk factors emerge, the combinations of risk factors experienced, and how the factors influence them" (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 2). Identifying risk factors is the first step to preventing school dropout.

"Education and private research organizations have identified two main types of factors associated with the likelihood of dropping out--one type involving family characteristics and the other involving students' experiences in school"

(United States General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 15). The *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs Report* (Hammond et al., 2007) classifies the factors associated with school dropout into four areas or domains: individual, family, school and community. Researchers have found that dropping out of school is the result of a wide variety of factors in the four domains (Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2001). This section of the literature review will describe the characteristics in the four domains (see Table 1).

Table 1. Factors Associated with School Dropout: Domains and Sub-Domains

Factors Associated with School Dropout: Four Domains			
Individual	Family	School	Community
High-Risk Demographic Characteristics	Background Characteristics	School Structure	Location and Type of Community
Adult Responsibilities	Level of Household Stress	Student Body Characteristics	Demographic Characteristics
High-Risk Attitudes, Values and Behaviors	Family Dynamics	School Environment	Environment
Poor School Performance	Attitudes, Values and Behavior Related to Education	Academic Practices	
Disengagement from School		Discipline Policies and Practices	
Education Stability			

(Information retrieved from *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs Report*, Hammond et al., 2007)

Individual Domain

The individual domain incorporates anything about the student as an individual that may influence school dropout. The domain includes factors that are related to individual students, including demographic characteristics, adult responsibilities, high-risk attitudes, values and behaviors, poor school performance, disengagement from school, and education stability (Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Individual characteristics also include how students felt about school, whether they were motivated to work hard, and if they felt connected to school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

High-risk demographic characteristics. “Studies have linked leaving school early to a number of individual factors that put children and youth at a greater risk” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 11). Many unalterable background characteristics such as race/ethnicity (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001; Schargel, 2004), gender (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001), and immigration status (Rumberger, 1995) have been documented. Another unalterable individual characteristic that may be a factor for school dropout is having limited cognitive abilities (Lehr et al., 2004; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) or some other type of disability (Lehr et al., 2004; Schargel, 2004; Kaufman et al., 1992).

Although the dropout rate has improved over the past decade, great variances exist among racial and ethnic groups. The ethnic group percentages

of dropouts from 2000 to 2011 have reduced, but the differences between ethnic groups is still vast. In 2000, the dropout rate for all races was 10.9%. In 2000, the Hispanic dropout rate was 27.8% while the white non-Hispanic racial/ethnic composition was 6.9% and the black non-Hispanic racial/ethnic composition was 13.1%. In 2011, the dropout rate for all races was 7.4%. In this timeframe, the Hispanic dropout rate was 15.1% while the white non-Hispanic racial/ethnic composition was 5.1% and the black non-Hispanic racial/ethnic composition was 8.0% (NCES, 2011). The Hispanic racial/ethnic composition had a much higher dropout rate for both timeframes with the black racial/ethnic composition having the second highest rate (NCES, 2011).

Males were also more likely to drop out of school than females regardless of race or ethnic group. Table 2 displays 2011 student dropout rates by race and ethnic diversity. Males had a dropout rate of 8.5% for all races compared to the female dropout rate of 6.3% (NCES, 2011). Hispanic males, black non-Hispanic males, and white males had much higher dropout rates than Hispanic females, black non-Hispanic females and white females. According to the data, males were more likely to drop out of school than females (NCES, 2011).

Table 2. Student Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnic Diversity for 2011

2011 Dropout Rates		
<i>Race</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Hispanic	17.3%	12.8%
Black non-Hispanic	9.5%	6.7%
White	5.9%	4.2%
<i>All Races</i>	8.5%	6.3%

(Information retrieved from NCES, 2011)

Adult responsibilities. Another element in the individual domain factor which impacts high school dropout is non-school experiences that require adolescents to take on adult responsibilities (Hammond et al., 2007). Such responsibilities include becoming a parent (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001), working in order to help with family expenses (Bridgeland et al., 2006), and having to care for siblings or other family members (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rosenthal, 1998).

The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts is a report of 500 former students who discuss their reasons for not continuing in high school. Although many were students who could have completed high school, “circumstances in students’ lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii). Many of these students gave personal, non-school related reasons as the justification for why they did not complete high school. Thirty-two percent of the dropouts surveyed indicated they had to get a job to help support the family; 26% indicated they became a parent; and 22% stated they had to take care of a family member (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

High-risk attitudes, values, and behaviors. Attitudes and behaviors may also contribute to the likelihood of school dropout. Suh and Suh (2007) found that if a student had a prior history of suspension, it increased the likelihood of the student dropping out of school by 78%. According to several studies, antisocial behaviors such as violence, substance use, or involvement

with law enforcement officials have been linked to dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland et al., 2009; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Low self-esteem and self-confidence (Rosenthal, 1998) as well as low occupational aspirations (Rumberger, 2001) are also individual domain factors of school dropout. Having friends who have dropped out of school or who are involved in antisocial behavior are other indicators of possible dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000, Bridgeland et al., 2006, 2009).

Poor school performance. “An individual’s school experiences have been found to have a major impact on the likelihood that he or she will graduate” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 12). Some dropouts leave school because of significant academic difficulties. According to Bridgeland et al. (2006), 35% of the dropouts reported that failing in school was a major factor for dropping out. Many students said they could not keep up with the schoolwork. Poor academic performance through grades, test scores, or course failure has been documented in various studies (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001; Sparks, 2013).

Many of the dropouts indicated they felt poorly prepared for high school, which led to academic difficulties. “Many of these students fell behind in elementary and middle school and could not make up the necessary ground” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii). Studies have documented how academic failure at first grade continues to impact student performance through middle school and high school (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland et

al., 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Students with a history of poor achievement evidenced by poor grades and poor test scores are more likely to drop out than students who experience academic success (United States General Accounting Office, 2002).

Grade retention is also highly correlated with dropping out of school. Retention in one or more grades is found to be at a much higher than average rate among students who drop out of school (United States General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 15). Kaufman et al. (1992) found that students who had repeated a grade in elementary school were almost five times more likely to drop out of school as those who had not. Students who were retained later than fourth grade were almost 11 times as likely to drop out than those who had never repeated a grade (Kaufman et al., 1992). Alexander et al. (2001) also found that retention in grade, especially in middle school, strongly correlated with high school dropout. Rumberger and Lim (2008) found that 37 out of 50 analyses of retention in elementary and/or middle school increased the possibility of dropping out of high school. Multiple retentions dramatically increase the prediction of school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Disengagement from school. Disengagement from school is another factor in the individual domain category of school dropout. A student's level of engagement is linked to a student's level of performance (Hammond et al., 2007). Low engagement and poor academic performance will increase the possibility of school dropout (Rumberger, 2001). Absenteeism is a form of

demonstrating disengagement with school. Evidence has shown that the number of days absent from school is associated with school dropout beginning in first grade and continuing each grade level, especially in the case of students with disabilities (Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, Hebbeler, & Newman, 1993). Forty-three percent of dropouts indicated that they missed too many days of school and could not catch up (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Jensen (2009) noted that absenteeism is the factor most closely correlated with dropout rates.

Student misbehavior is another individual domain factor of student disengagement, which can lead to school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Kaufman et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2001; Sparks, 2013; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Behaviors that lead to repeated suspensions can increase a student's disengagement with school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Suh and Suh (2007) found that students who had a prior history of suspensions were 78% more likely to drop out of high school. Other academic disengagement behaviors such as cutting classes, truancy, consistently not completing homework, and coming to school unprepared are also documented in research as indicators of dropout (Kaufman et al., 1992; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The United States General Accounting Office Report (2002) also included chronic truancy and tardiness as factors for school dropout.

Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that 47% of dropouts who participated in their research dropped out of school because classes did not hold their attention. The dropouts "reported being bored and disengaged from high school"

(Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii). Sixty-nine percent of the students responded that they were not motivated or inspired to work hard and 80% stated they had one hour or less of homework each night (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Some dropouts indicated that they did not feel they belonged at school, they had trouble getting along with the teachers, and they had a general dislike for school (Lehr et al., 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006). Dropouts said they would have “worked harder if more was demanded of them and 70% said they could have graduated if they had tried” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iii). Disengagement from school, whether it is academic, behavioral, psychological, or social, serves as a contributing factor for high school dropout.

Education stability. The last individual domain factor of school dropout is education stability. Education mobility is another school related experience that can highly impact school dropout. “High family mobility that results in a number of residential moves and changes in schools can cause major disruptions in the lives of children and youth” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 31). Changing school, especially if there are multiple changes, is correlated with school dropout (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001). Research shows that this is especially true for students with disabilities (Lehr et al., 2004).

Family Domain

Family domain includes elements that are related to family background and home experiences. Many “family risk factors in the categories of family background characteristics and family engagement/commitment to education”

were key predictors of school dropout (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 30). These factors may include background characteristics, level of household stress, family dynamics, attitudes, beliefs and values about education, and behavior related to education (Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Background characteristics. “A student’s family background and home experience exert a powerful influence over educational outcomes, including dropping out of school” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 14). Low socioeconomic status (SES) has been cited in many studies as a contributing predictor of school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987; Lehr et al., 2004; McMillen & Kaufman, 1997; Orr, 1987; Rumberger, 2001; Schargel, 2004; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Students from all economic backgrounds are at risk of dropping out; however, low-income students are more likely to be affected (Balfanz et al., 2009). The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) found that students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely to drop out of high school than middle-income students.

Orr (1987) stated that educational and socioeconomic backgrounds together are the strongest family domain predictors of high school dropouts. Socioeconomic status, most commonly measured by parental income and education, was confirmed as bearing the strongest relation to dropping out of high school in a United States General Accounting Office Report (2002).

Alexander et al. (2001) determined that students of lower socioeconomic status had a dropout rate four times higher than that of students of a higher socioeconomic status. Although not all low socioeconomic students drop out of school, low socioeconomic status is a common characteristic of students who do not finish high school.

Adolescents in non-English speaking homes have also been found to be more likely to drop out of high school (Rosenthal, 1998; Rumberger, 2001). Students from single-parent families, students with a stepparent, as well as students with an older sibling who has already dropped out are more likely to drop out than students without these characteristics (Kaufman et al., 1992; Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2001; United States General Accounting Office, 2002).

Level of household stress. Another family domain factor associated with dropouts is the level of household stress. High levels of stress on families can also lead to school dropout (Rosenthal, 1998). Problems including substance abuse, finance or health issues, and family conflict can cause high levels of stress (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rosenthal, 1998; Suh & Suh, 2007). Also, family changes such as moving, death, divorce, or remarriage may result in school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Lehr et al., 2004).

Family dynamics. The dynamics of the family and the relationships between the family members are additional family domain predictors of high school dropout. Students who had low parent monitoring of their daily activities

or students who had permissive parents have been linked to higher dropout rates (Lehr et al., 2004; Rosenthal, 1998).

Attitudes, values and behavior related to education. Parents' attitudes and values about schooling and how they interact with school personnel is another family domain factor that influences dropout rates. "Other aspects of a student's home life such as the level of parent involvement and support, parent's educational expectations, parent's attitudes about school and stability of the family environment can also influence a youth's decision to stay in school" (United States General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 15). Low parental involvement and low parental educational expectations have been linked to school dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Kaufman et al., 1992; Rumberger, 1995). Additionally, a student is more likely to drop out of school if his or her parent or sibling has dropped out of school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Kaufman et al., 1992). Family attitudes, beliefs and behaviors towards schooling directly impacts students' decisions to leave school early.

School Domain

The school domain includes factors that are related to school structure, environment, and policies. Characteristics within this domain include school structure, student body characteristics, school environment, academic practices, and discipline policies and practices (Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

School structure. School structure, including whether a school is public or private, may be a factor in school dropout. Research has shown that religious or private schools have had lower dropout rates than public schools (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 2001). However, other factors such as student body make-up, resources and family support, may be influencing the reduced dropout rate rather than just the structure of the facility (Rumberger, 2001).

School size may also be a factor of school dropout. Large school size, especially for schools with large numbers of low socio-economic students, has been linked to high school dropout (Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995). Researchers state that the “traditional structures common to these large schools are the key to their low promoting power” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 15). Larger schools and larger numbers of students are less likely to have small classes or strong student/teacher relationships due to the increased number of students.

Student body characteristics. Factors within schools themselves were also found to be contributors to high school dropout. The composition of the student body was one factor that consistently impacted educational outcomes (Rumberger, 2001). Also, schools with higher numbers of minority students or students of poverty have higher numbers of school dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kaufman et al., 1992; Rumberger, 1995).

School environment. A negative school environment is another school domain factor that can lead to high school dropout. Reduced resources, high

concentrations of minority students or students of poverty, and low student performance are some factors of a school environment that can produce a negative school climate (Goldschmidt & Wang 1999; Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995). High rates of absenteeism, high rates of student misbehavior and violence/safety concerns have also been connected to higher dropout rates (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kaufman et al., 1992).

Academic practices. Academic practices have been cited as a school domain factor for school dropout. Different reasons were given for dropping out of school including lack of connection to the school, feeling of boredom or lack of motivation, academic challenges, and stress of real world events (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students surveyed felt they had a better chance of graduating high school if the classes would have been more connected with real world experiences, had been more interesting, and were smaller so students could have more individualized instruction (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Lehr et al. (2004) also reported a lack of relevant high school curriculum as the main reason behind dropout in their study.

Discipline policies and practices. Discipline policies and practices is another factor of the school domain that may cause school dropout. “Zero tolerance discipline policies that require automatic arrest and suspension or expulsion for substance possession or sales and weapons possession also have the potential to impact dropout rates” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 16). Such policies are a double dose for students; not only are they suspended or expelled

from school but they also have to appear in court for school misbehavior (Miller, Ross, & Sturgis, 2005). Policies that increase the likelihood of these consequences increase the likelihood of school dropout.

Increased accountability and high-stakes testing increase the pressure to suspend, expel, or transfer students who are disruptive to the educational process (Hammond et al., 2007). Students who are disruptive or misbehave are likely to be suspended or excluded from school (Miller et al., 2005; Rumberger, 2001). Regardless of the reason for the school absence, lack of attendance leads to school dropout.

Community Domain

The community domain includes factors that are related to communities and neighborhoods in which the students live. Community domain characteristics include the location and type of community, demographic characteristics, and environment (Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Location and type of community. The location of school and type of community are community domain factors in school dropout. Dropout rates are higher in urban than suburban or rural schools (Lehr et al., 2004; Schargel, 2004). The highest dropout rates occur in the Southern or Western regions of the United States (Lehr et al., 2004; Rosenthal, 1998; Schargel, 2004; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Demographic characteristics. The demographic characteristic of communities is a community domain factor that may impact school dropout. Impoverished communities, communities with high numbers of minorities or communities with a larger number of foreign-born members have significantly higher dropout rates (Rosenthal, 1998; Rumberger, 2001). Higher dropout rates have also been linked with single parent families and families of low education levels (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rosenthal, 1998).

Environment. Unsatisfactory condition existing in communities is another community domain factor that can impact student dropout. “Urban, high poverty areas are more likely to have high levels of violence, drug-related crime, and overcrowding which could also impact school engagement, performance and ultimately dropout” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 17). Communities with a high incidence of instability and mobility may also be linked to higher dropout rates (Rosenthal, 1998).

Risk factors for dropping out of school exist in all life domains including personal, family, school, community, and peer relations. Students may drop out of school because they struggle academically, they do not feel connected, or they misbehave. Students may have adult responsibilities that make school a low priority, or they may not have the parent support and encouragement to stay in school. Students may drop out of school because they have negative experiences with other students or staff or they may be bored and unmotivated to attend. Finally, students may drop out of school because they are highly

transient or the drug-invested, crime-filled environment in which they live does not value school.

As risk factors accumulate, the chances of students dropping out of school increase. For most students, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act. Instead, it is a “gradual process of disengagement” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. iv). “Students who drop out often cite factors across multiple domains and there are complex interactions among risk factors” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 2). A combination of such characteristics over a long period of time may begin the process of being disengaged with school and result in dropping out.

Effective school leaders work to help all students succeed. Such leaders must be able to recognize students who are at risk of early school dropout and align strategies and structures to help the students experience success in school. The following section of this literature review will focus on characteristics of effective school leaders. Such characteristics are especially important when school leaders are working with at-risk students.

Effective School Leaders

According to the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE) and Mid-continent Research for Education Learning (McREL), (NCSBE/McREL, 2008), there is a new vision for school leadership, one that must be able to “create schools as organizations that can learn and change quickly if they are to improve performance” (p. 1). “Leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors as an influence on learning according to a six-year study

which analyzed data from 180 schools in nine states” (Mitgang, 2012, p. 3).

Marzano et al. (2005) deduced from their leadership studies in the United States that principal leadership had a significant and positive correlation with student achievement. DuFour and Marzano (2011) support the findings that “powerful school leadership on the part of the principal has a positive effect on student achievement” (p. 48).

Parrett and Budge (2012) concluded in their research of high poverty/high performing schools that significant gains are not sustained without “effective leaders who serve as catalysts for the specific actions that in turn drive the success of these schools--actions that build leadership capacity; focus on student, professional, and system learning; and foster safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments” (p. 33). The relationship between principal and student is indirect since principals do not directly teach students (Leithwood et al., 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005). Whether the contact is direct or indirect, principal leadership does make an instructional difference for students (Leithwood et al., 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012).

The traditional view of a school principal being the middle manager or overseer of school operations is no longer valid in public education. The Wallace Foundation (2011) accurately describes the shift in the role of the school administrator: “They can no longer function simply as building managers, tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations and avoiding mistakes.

They have to be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” (p. 4). Mitgang (2012) also noted “successful school reform depends on having principals well prepared to change schools and improve instruction, not just manage buildings and budgets” (p. 3). The 2009 *Strong Leaders Strong Schools Report*, indicates:

The role of the school leader has progressively shifted from building manager to instructional leader. Effective school leaders create vision, develop and support teachers and school staff, and strengthen school culture. They also share or distribute leadership roles among teachers and other school staff, particularly to enhance instructional leadership capacity. (Shelton, 2010, p. 5)

The shift from building manager to visionary and instructional leader is one that is necessary in order to better meet individual needs of all students, but especially students at risk of early school dropout.

The school leader’s role today “draws lessons from contemporary corporate life suggesting that leadership focuses with great clarity on what is essential, what needs to be done and how to get it done” (The Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 4). Dramatic changes have occurred in the role of the school administrator. Today’s school executives must be able to create systems of change and build relationships with and across staff. They must develop a shared vision and understanding and build alliances with all stakeholders, including parents and the community (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Shelton, 2010; The Wallace Foundation, 2011).

According to the current School Executive Evaluation Process (NCSBE/McREL, 2008),

The work of the school executive must include creating a culture in which leadership:

- Is distributed among all members of the school community;
- Consists of open, honest communication;
- Is focused on the use of data, teamwork, research-based practices; and
- Uses modern tools to drive ethical and principled, goal-oriented action. (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 1)

All of the school executive standards are interrelated and closely aligned with promoting student success. The Southern Regional Education Board's Report, *The Three Essentials: Improving Schools Requires District Vision, District and State Support, and Principal Leadership* (2010), emphasizes the importance of empowering the principal to "engage the faculty in creating a comprehensive school improvement plan, for fidelity in implementing that plan and ultimately, for improving results" (p. 4).

Characteristics of effective school leaders are clearly related to improving academic success for all students. Therefore, characteristics of effective school leaders are directly connected to working with at-risk students and preventing them from dropping out of school. If characteristics of effective school leaders are beneficial for the average student, then these characteristics are even more advantageous for students who struggle academically and are at risk of academic failure. Characteristics of effective school leaders are identified in the seven leadership standards found in the *North Carolina Executive Evaluation*.

School executives are responsible for ensuring that leadership happens in all seven critical areas:

- Strategic
- Instructional
- Cultural
- Human Resource
- Managerial
- External Development
- Micro-political

Promoting academic success of at-risk students is embedded within all areas of leadership. This section of the literature review will discuss the seven leadership strands and some of the research-based practices within each leadership strand in order to connect the role of the leader with motivating and improving academic achievement of children at risk for school dropout.

Strategic Leadership

The North Carolina State Board of Education (2006) defines strategic leadership as the ability to create “a climate of inquiry that challenges the school community to continually re-purpose itself by building its core values and beliefs about its preferred future and then developing a pathway to reach it” (p. 3).

Effective school executive practices in the area of strategic leadership include creating and communicating a vision and mission, fostering collaboration among staff, parents and community, and distributing leadership opportunities

throughout the school (NC State Board of Education, 2006). Effective school leaders who are successful with at-risk students strategically plan and communicate a common vision and mission to all stakeholders and provide opportunities to distribute leadership opportunities among staff.

Vision and mission. Through strategic leadership, the school executive creates “conditions that result in strategically re-imagining the school’s vision, mission, and goals in the 21st century” (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 7). School executives lead strategically by creating a process for development and periodic evaluation of the school’s vision, mission and strategic goals with all stakeholders in order to better meet the social, emotional, cultural and academic needs of students. Setting high, concrete goals for all students and communicating “strong professional beliefs about schools, teaching and learning that reflect latest research and best practice” are characteristics of a successful strategic leader (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 7). According to Mendels (2012), “Effective leadership begins with the development of a school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students” (p. 55). Purposeful school administrators help to outline the vision and solicit support from staff, parents, and community. Parrett and Budge (2012) found that:

A mind-set of high expectations and resulting action often begins with the development of a common vision of what powerful learning looks like for all students and a verbalized belief that every student can and will achieve at high levels and experience other types of success in school. (p. 73)

Porter et al. (2008) found that having high expectations with clear and public standards for all students is one effective strategy for closing the achievement gap between students living in poverty and students who live above the line of poverty as well as raising overall achievement for all students.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) include setting direction as one of the three core responsibilities necessary for student learning. Setting the direction includes “building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations and communicating the direction” (as cited in Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011, p. 46). A common vision that is understood by all stakeholders and high expectations for all students to be successful are strategic leadership practices that make a difference for all students (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Porter et al., 2008; Shelton, 2010). Setting a common vision and maintaining high expectations are especially important for at-risk students.

Collaboration--support of team and vision. One role of an effective school administrator is to lead the staff and community in the development of the school mission and vision and the annual school improvement plan (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). An effective leader utilizes a collaborative approach with staff, parents, and community as they work together to develop strategic goals and objectives to meet the specific needs of the school. This is especially true when working with a school population that has a high number of at-risk students. It is important that input is solicited from all stakeholders and that the

mission and vision are clear, focused and inclusive of all students' needs. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) suggests that all schools should establish a governing council that includes students, parents, and teachers to help make decisions concerning student learning. This collaboration provides "an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership" (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, p. 4). Successful school leaders "establish and sustain a culture that is conducive to learning by fostering and establishing collaboration, trust, and high expectations" (Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011, p. 134). Working with stakeholders collaboratively builds trust and support for the school's mission and vision (Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Shelton, 2010).

Distributive leadership. Distributive leadership means that the principal's duties are shared among other administrators and teacher leaders (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011). Principals should guide, not control. "The role of leadership is to create unity around a shared vision and common tasks; it is not about micro-managing instruction" (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011, p. 45). The second-generation correlates of Effective Schools Research described the role of the principal as a "leader of leaders" (Lezotte, 1991, p.3). Lezotte (1991) writes about the school principal developing skills of a coach, partner or cheerleader as leadership is distributed among many qualified staff. Developing teacher leaders does not lessen the authority of the school administrator. Distributive leadership strengthens the team and its purpose by empowering multiple people to support the common cause (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Lezotte, 1991; Shelton, 2010).

Distributive leadership is a valuable strategic quality to employ in a school that has a large number of students at risk of early school dropout. An effective school leader utilizes the leadership abilities of strong teacher leaders to help put the strategies and interventions in place to help at-risk students be successful.

Instructional Leadership

In this era of high accountability, one of the most important responsibilities of an educational leader is to establish and support high instructional expectations and standards for all students. In the Executive Evaluation Instrument, the Instructional Leadership Standard “sets high standards for 21st century instruction and assessment in a no-nonsense accountable environment” (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 8). Marzano et al. (2005) determined that involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment is critical to instructional leadership. The school executive must know and understand best instructional and school practices and utilize this knowledge to “create collaborative structures with the school for the design of highly engaging schoolwork for students, on-going peer review of this work and the sharing of this work throughout the professional community” (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 8).

Strong instructional leadership is especially needed in schools with large numbers of at-risk students. Students at risk of academic failure cannot afford to waste time on frivolous activities that do not have instructional value. At-risk students must have focused and targeted instruction based on individual academic needs. Effective leaders must know and understand best instructional

and school practices so that they can ensure that at-risk students are getting the very best instruction possible.

Within the Instructional Leadership Standard, elements are focused on the learning and teaching, curriculum, instruction and assessment and instructional time. It is the responsibility of the leader to protect instructional time through established schedules and processes and to develop collaborative learning structures (Marzano, 2003).

Focus on learning and teaching, curriculum, instruction and assessment. Highly effective principals and school administrators “recognize that teaching and learning are the top priority and demonstrate this by creating a rigorous and comprehensive curricular program, maximizing instructional time, making daily classroom visits, providing specific feedback, and following up on classroom observations” (Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011, p. 128). In order to establish high expectations for all students, the principal leads the discussions in the areas of learning and teaching, curriculum, instruction and assessment based on research and best practices (Bridgeland et al., 2009). The school leader must be an instructional leader, maintaining high expectations, implementing research-based best practices and modifying the curriculum and instruction, as needed (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). Focusing on learning and teaching, curriculum, instruction and assessment are especially important for leaders who are working with at-risk students. To be an effective

instructional leader, one must be knowledgeable of the curriculum and best instructional practices.

Knowledgeable, instructional leader. Effective instructional leadership plays a vital role in narrowing the learning gap of economically disadvantaged students (Murphy et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006). Effective instructional leaders intently monitor the instructional program to make sure it is meeting the needs of all students but especially the students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Murphy et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006). In fact, David Spence, President of the Southern Regional Education Board, argues that schools need principals focused on instruction to provide teachers with the leadership and support they need to help students gain the skills and knowledge now identified as important for success in our ever-changing world (Southern Regional Education Board's Report, 2010). Leaders who are knowledgeable and involved in the instruction devote effort to ensure the school is hiring teachers who have beliefs consistent with those of the school and devote time and support to strengthen teaching which produces highly productive schools (Murphy et al., 2007). Effective instructional leaders hold crucial conversations and provide essential feedback to teachers concerning performance, data and observed patterns (Crawford & Haycock, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007). Finally, these leaders place value on recognizing and rewarding "quality teaching and demonstrated student learning" (Murphy et al., 2007, p. 185). Knowledgeable, instructional leaders monitor and

support high quality, engaging instruction and model high instructional expectations and standards for all staff and students.

Focus on high expectations. Establishing and maintaining high expectations for all staff and students is an essential characteristic of effective leadership. Effective educational organizations have a clear production focus on the outcome (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2007). Leaders of high-performing schools work to establish a culture of high expectations for teachers, learners, and most importantly, themselves. These leaders are optimistic that the expectations can be attained and work to inspire their staff (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2007). Such leaders model what they expect. Leaders of high-performing schools are clear in defining the school-wide expectations and set policies in place to bring them to fruition. High performing leaders “make certain that expectations are decoupled from beliefs about biosocial characteristics of students” (Murphy et al., 2007, p. 191). The message for high performing leaders is clear: the administration and staff expect all students to succeed at high academic levels. This expectation is especially important when working with students at risk of academic failure. Effective leaders continually monitor the “effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning” (Murphy et al., 2007, p. 191). Murphy et al. (2007) acknowledge that these leaders are grounded in instruction and continual improvement. Effective leaders who uphold high expectations create a culture that is driven to push past complacency to surpass expectations. Maintaining high expectations is an

important instructional characteristic for administrators, teachers, parents, policy makers, and community members.

Implementation of research-based best practices. Effective instructional leaders investigate research-based best practices that yield high results for all students. Much research is available on best practices for working with students of poverty (Burns, Haywood, & Delclos, 1987; Hackman & Farah, 2009; Jensen, 2009). Understanding how poverty affects the brain is an important facet of the educational process that is often unacknowledged, but the implications of current brain research have the capacity to dramatically impact the learning of children of poverty. The brains of children living in poverty often develop in ways that undermine their ability to perform effectively in school (Burns et al., 1987; Jensen, 2009). Jensen's research cites four main areas in which students are most significantly at-risk: "emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues" (Jensen, 2009, p. 14). Brain imaging research has supported the theory that children of poverty have significant differences in brain development (Hackman & Farah, 2009). Burns et al. (1987) and Hackman and Farah (2009) have identified differences in the neurological development of children of poverty in the areas of language ability, working memory, and impulsivity control. Additionally, they recommended that educators encourage cognitive development through explicit instruction of skills, providing opportunities for children to think aloud and justify their thinking, and playing games that help develop their imaginations (Hackman

& Farah, 2009). Utilizing such strategies is important because they are the foundation of problem-solving skills. Burns et al. (1987) propose that low quality adult-child interactions may be attributed to these differences and suggest that educators form strong relationships with children from low socio-economic backgrounds. They further advise teachers to focus on explicit instruction of cognitive strategies that support the problem-solving process (Burns et al., 1987).

Jensen (2009) also studied school-wide success factors for students of poverty. He proposed the use of five strategies: supporting the whole child, using hard data, holding teachers and students accountable, building relationships with students and their families, and developing an enrichment model for intervention. While these factors do present a significant challenge to educators, there are actions that educators can take to overcome these obstacles to student learning. Strategies such as developing strong relationships, direct instruction in social skills, empowering students to take control of their learning, building core skills, accurately identifying and addressing deficits, and increasing health-related services are effective methods of overcoming the effects of poverty (Jensen, 2009). Understanding and applying this research in classrooms and schools is vital to ensure that students from homes of poverty are receiving an equitable education.

Curriculum and instruction modifications. Another effective leadership quality is ensuring that curriculum and instructional modifications are based on formal and informal data in order to better meet students' individual needs.

Curriculum modifications can take on various forms including differentiation of curriculum and acceptance and acknowledgement of cultural differences.

Disadvantaged students are better able to meet academic challenges of school when the teachers respect the cultural backgrounds of the students, encourage the students to draw and build on their past experiences and expose the students to unfamiliar experiences, and explain and model academic learning (Knapp, Turnbull, & Shields, 1990).

Effective curricular models for working with disadvantaged students focus on meaning and understanding from the beginning, balance routine skill learning with novel and complex tasks throughout the learning process, provide context and application for skill learning, involve more active participation on the part of the students, and eliminate unnecessary redundancy (Haberman, 1991; Knapp et al., 1990). Teachers who are effective with disadvantaged students teach explicitly the underlying thinking processes along with the skills, encourage students to use each other as a teaching resource, enable the students to manipulate the content of their learning in a meaningful way, and gradually release the responsibility for their learning to the students (Haberman, 1991; Jensen, 2009; Knapp et al., 1990). Helping students from homes of poverty learn to think and make deliberate choices for themselves is an important skill for them to learn (Haberman, 1991; Jensen, 2009).

At-risk students should be given the opportunity to work in many group settings to develop divergent thinking and to internalize their learning. Schools

should utilize both heterogeneous grouping such as cooperative learning teams and flexible, temporary ability-groups (Habernam, 1991; Knapp et al., 1990). Integrating supplementary assistance into the regular classroom and capitalizing on individualized instruction rather than long-term grouping maximizes student learning. Consequently, modifying the curriculum and instructional approach is an effective strategy in meeting the needs of children from economically disadvantaged homes.

Focus on instructional time. The second element of Instructional Leadership is focusing on the instructional time within the school day. It is the responsibility of the leader to protect instructional time through established schedules and processes and to develop collaborative learning structures. Protecting instructional time is important for both the at-risk student as well as the teachers of the at-risk students. At-risk students need maximum time to learn and process information and teachers of at-risk students need time to teach as well as time to examine the student data, collaborate with professional learning communities, and plan for instruction. If instructional time is not protected for students and teachers, then none of these processes can take place successfully.

Instructional time. Effective leaders structure the school schedule so that all teachers have maximum uninterrupted instructional time as well as individual and team collaborative planning. Leaders of high performing schools ensure that academic learning time is protected and maximized (Murphy et al.,

2007). Teachers must have uninterrupted time to teach, and all students must have time to explore, discover, and learn. Protecting teachers' time to meet in study groups to collaborate and plan for student learning is essential according to Drago-Severson (2004). Mullen and Hutingger (2008) also note that administrators demonstrate the importance of teacher growth and student learning when they prioritize staff's efforts to focus on student learning rather than other competing needs. Focusing on individual student learning and collaboratively planning to best meet individual needs will increase an at-risk student's learning. On the other hand, principals must also "hold teachers accountable for their decisions and use of time" (Mullen & Hutingger, 2008, p. 281). Guarding instructional time and cooperative planning time as well as holding teachers accountable for good use of their time are crucial responsibilities for quality instructional leaders.

Learning structures. Instructional leaders ensure that collaborative structures are in place so staff can collaborate on highly engaging schoolwork for students, and peers can review and share the work throughout the professional community. Instructional leaders set learning structures in place that promote learning, teaching and leading (Bennis, 1990; Collinson, Cook, & Conley, 2006; Jensen, 2009). Collinson et al. (2006) noted six conditions that help foster new organizational learning: "prioritizing learning for all members, facilitating the sharing of knowledge, attending to human relationships, fostering inquiry, enhancing democratic governance and providing for members' self fulfillment" (p.

110). According to Jensen (2009), the strategy that is most unique to current educational pedagogy is having a focus on enhancing existing learning environments and structures. "The enrichment mind-set means fostering intellectual curiosity, emotional engagement, and social bonding" (Jensen, 2009, p. 94). Enriching learning environments include a rigorous curriculum, engaging instruction, the best teachers for the neediest students, increased physical activity and participation in the arts, good nutrition, and support to help at-risk students reach high expectations (Jensen, 2009). Helping the school community change its focus from deficit thinking to an appreciation of the abilities and talents of students is vital to the success of children living in poverty.

Bennis (1990) asserts that leaders can begin to "manage the dream" (p. 46) by not only creating a vision for their school but by creating a shared understanding. In creating this shared understanding, leaders encourage their staffs to play an active role in helping to develop the vision. Changing ineffective practices is an important part of creating a culture of questioning. Staff collaboration must be an expectation and schedules must be designed so that teachers have the time and resources to collaborate in order to positively impact student learning.

Cultural Leadership

Understanding the important role a school's culture contributes to the exemplary performance of the school is the foundation of cultural leadership (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). Marzano et al. (2005) report fostering school culture

indirectly affects student achievement. Three elements of successful cultural leaders are building a sense of community, being culturally responsive to traditions, and developing efficacy and empowerment.

Sense of community. In their analysis of empirical studies of leadership and student achievement, Marzano et al. (2005) “defined the responsibility of Culture as the extent to which the leader fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation among staff” (p. 48). Evidence of respect and strong relationships between and among staff, students, and the community is a strong indicator of effective cultural leadership (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011).

Acceptance and value of individual differences and maintaining high expectations and standards for all students are also evidences of effective cultural leadership (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008). Ratcliffe and Harts (2011) support the idea of community through establishing positive relationships and maintaining open communication. Effective principals focus on building a sense of community by respecting all members of the community, welcoming solution-oriented, no-blame professional environments and providing school-wide positive, motivating activities (Portin et al., 2009). Accepting and valuing individual differences, maintaining high expectations and standards, and establishing a sense of community are especially important cultural factors to implement when working with at-risk students.

Culturally responsive to traditions. Effective cultural leaders seek to understand the diverse student populations they serve as well as the history and

traditions of the school. This includes valuing and supporting traditions, artifacts, and symbols of the school and community that reinforce the sense of school identity and pride (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; NCSBE/McREL, 2008). The school executive must visibly support the positive, culturally responsive traditions of the school community while promoting a sense of well-being among all stakeholders (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). However, an effective leader must also be able to recognize the positive and negative aspects of a school's culture and be willing to re-culture the school if needed to better align with the school's goals of improving student learning (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; NCSBE/McREL, 2008).

Efficacy and empowerment. An effective cultural leader also builds a sense of efficacy and empowerment among the staff (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). According to Hoy (2000), teacher efficacy is the “teachers’ confidence in their ability to promote students’ learning” (p. 2). The power of efficacy leads to the conclusion that the “beliefs of teachers and school leaders have a significant effect, for better or worse, on the performance of students” (Reeves, 2010, p. 31). Administrator and teacher efficacy have a powerful impact on student achievement (Reeves, 2010).

Teacher empowerment is another practice of effective cultural leadership. School executives must ensure that each staff member has the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful (Mendels, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012). According to Chenoweth and Theokas (2011), effective school administrators

“work to ensure that teachers in their buildings are knowledgeable, skillful professionals who understand what children need to know and be able to do and who can use a variety of teaching techniques to teach them” (p. 103).

Opportunities for learning must be job-embedded, focused on student work, and conducted in collaboration so that teachers feel empowered to make sound instructional decisions to maximize student learning (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

Effective principals cultivate leadership in others and give them the opportunities to lead (The Wallace Foundation, 2011). They make “good use of all the skills and knowledge of the faculty and among others, encouraging the many capable adults who make up a school community to step into leadership roles and responsibilities” (Mendels, 2012, p. 56).

Teacher empowerment also includes providing staff opportunities to lead. The principal’s role is to guide rather than control (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011). Therefore, sharing responsibilities and utilizing teacher leaders empowers staff and builds a stronger school culture. Chenoweth and Theokas (2011) noted that many of the successful principals in their study of highly impacted schools effectively empower teacher leaders on a regular basis.

Human Resource Leadership

The Human Resource Leadership Standard ensures that school executives institute professional learning communities school-wide and engage and empower accomplished teachers in a distributive manner (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). This standard also sets a process or system in place for recruitment,

induction, support, evaluation, development and retention of high quality staff (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). School leaders also have the responsibility to encourage and guide teachers and other professional staff in developing their career paths and to support the district succession plan (NCSBE/McREL, 2008). Within the Human Resource Leadership Standard there are three performance elements: professional development and professional learning communities; recruiting, hiring, placing and mentoring of staff; and teacher and staff evaluation. The importance of quality professional development, collaboration, and recruitment of quality teachers is essential in improving the academic achievement of at-risk children (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Schmoker, 2006).

Professional development. An effective method for school administrators to support teachers and to build sustained school improvement is creating opportunities for the staff to participate in effective staff development (DuFour et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006). Professional development should be purposeful and based on individual as well as school level needs. Effective leaders demonstrate the value of professional development by actively participating with the staff (Murphy & Lick, 2005). The leaders' expectations and monitoring of the professional development shows their perception of the professional development's worth and importance. The implementation of the professional development should be monitored and coached in order to successfully make a difference in student learning (Murphy & Lick, 2005).

Purposeful professional development with a specific focus and intentional follow up result in increased student learning (DuFour et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006).

Professional learning communities. Implementing purposeful and focused professional learning communities is another way effective leaders support teachers and improve student achievement (DuFour et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006). Professional learning communities are based on three essential principles—student learning, endeavors at collaborative planning and problem solving, and attention to academic results (DuFour et al., 2005). Effective leaders provide collaborative planning and problem solving to critically examine practices and their consequences (DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Schmoker, 2006). According to DuFour and Eaker (2008), building the capacity for teachers to work together as a professional learning community has the greatest impact on increasing student learning and eliminating gaps in achievement.

Regardless of the name given to the learning community, the structure is most essential. Teachers working together as learning communities meet on a regular basis to discuss the essential standards and how they can best be taught. Discussions are focused on the results from common assessments, and interventions or enrichment is designed to meet the needs of individual students (DuFour & Eaker, 2008). Professional learning communities build on internal expertise and increase the knowledge of every teacher on the team. Through this focused teamwork, teachers begin to recognize effective practices and share

what they know is working. Discussions focus on teaching and learning and what individual teachers are doing well (DuFour et al., 2005). The professional learning community structure allows school leaders to empower their staffs in the reflection and the continual improvement process (Schmoker, 2006). Creating professional learning communities requires school leaders to model lifelong learning and reflection. DuFour et al. (2005) note that a successful professional learning community “requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (p. 42). Focused, collaborative professional learning communities result in increased student achievement; however, effective collaboration requires hiring and retaining quality instructional staff members.

Recruiting, hiring, and placing staff. Recruiting and hiring effective and high quality teachers is another responsibility of effective school leaders. Instructional leaders must ensure students from homes of poverty have the most knowledgeable and effective teachers. Crawford and Haycock (2008) argue that strong teachers are not evenly distributed at all schools and for all students, and there are marked differences in the amount of learning that occurs in these classrooms. Unfortunately, teacher expertise is not evenly dispersed across schools and students from a lower socioeconomic status are often the recipients of the weakest teachers (Murphy et al., 2007).

Gordon, Kane, and Staiger (2006) found that students taught by effective teachers show greater rates of academic growth than students from classrooms where the teacher is less effective. All children deserve highly effective teachers, but students at risk of early school dropout need high quality teachers each year throughout their educational career. Effective leaders need to determine methods to attract highly qualified teachers to schools serving students with the most academic need (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Crawford & Haycock, 2008; Gordon et al., 2006; Jensen, 2009; Knapp et al., 1990). Effective leaders seek highly qualified staff members that have the heart, desire, and ability to be successful with students at risk of academic failure.

Managerial Leadership

According to North Carolina State Board of Education (2006), successful school leaders must “ensure that the school has processes and systems in place for budgeting, staffing, problem-solving, communicating expectations and scheduling that result in organizing the work routines in the building” (p. 7). Effective leaders make good use of the resources at hand and are good managers (The Wallace Foundation, 2011). Three effective practices in the area of managerial leadership are developing a system for budgeting, establishing a process for organizational management, and creating a system of communication.

System for budgeting. Monitoring the school budget and involving staff in budget decisions is a role of successful leaders (NCSBE, 2006). Effective

leaders let the school's priorities drive the budgeting process (Parrett & Budge, 2012). An effective school leader must be a strong instructional leader as well as a manager who can effectively and efficiently handle the day-to-day operations of running a school. Parrett and Budge (2012) note that effective school leaders in high performing schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students "ensure that resources are effectively managed, time is well used, and data-based decision making becomes the norm" (p. 95).

Process for organizational management. In a 2011 study of 33 effective leaders of high poverty schools, Chenoweth and Theokas found a positive relationship between the greater amount of time spent on organizational management activities and positive school outcomes. Effective instructional leadership cannot occur without effective managerial leadership. Effective leaders must be able to balance the instructional needs of the school with the ability to "target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, provide teachers with the opportunities they need to improve, and keep the school running smoothly" (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011, p. 54). Effective principals "schedule their time to reflect their instructional priorities" (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011, p. 123). The principals acknowledge that the managerial, every day quick-win activities are important but they do not let these activities consume their day (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011).

An effective master schedule provides as much instructional time for students as possible while also allowing collaborative planning time for teachers.

“By making scheduling a lever to move student achievement, they transform the task of scheduling from a mechanistic chore, filling time blocks and rooms with teachers and students, into a key instructional improvement strategy” (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011, p. 126). Effective leaders strategize to ensure that maximal time on task is possible by planning the master schedule with the focus of keeping classroom instructional time sacred for all students (Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011).

System of communication. “Communication refers to the extent to which the school leader establishes strong lines of communication with and between teachers and students” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 46). Clear communication is important in all schools but is especially important in schools with large numbers of at-risk students. Effective communication is vital in all aspects of leadership (Elmore, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). The administrator has the responsibility to build capacity for effective communication with teachers, students, parents, and community. Effective communication involves “developing effective means for teachers to communicate with one another, being easily accessible to teachers, and maintaining open and effective lines of communication with staff” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 46). Effective communication results in improved teacher morale and teacher retention, parent and community relationships, and student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005).

External Development Leadership

In the External Development Leadership Standard the school leader “designs structures and processes that result in community engagement, support, and ownership” (NCSBE/McREL, 2008, p. 14). Effective leaders create opportunities where parents, community, businesses and school staff plan and work together as joint stakeholders for the good of the students. Parent and community involvement and outreach is documented by research as a positive influence on at-risk students (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Jensen, 2009).

Parent outreach. Relevant factors associated with a student being considered at risk for failure in school include having limited parental involvement, coming from a low-income family, and lacking access to a print-rich environment (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Jensen, 2009; Pagani, Jalbert, & Girard, 2006; Schargel, Thacker, & Bell, 2007). Parental involvement is considered a critical role in the success of the learning process. Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) assert that there is a significant correlation between the amount of parental involvement and the success of students who are considered at risk. Many of the children who lack parental involvement in school-related activities are not successful academically. Since parental involvement and school success are related, educational leaders must realize the value of these relationships and encourage parental involvement in the school and classroom. Through this paradigm, parents can form

partnerships with teachers in their children's education (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Pagani et al., 2006). Increased student success is the main driving point for family partnerships. Epstein and Sheldon (2006) concluded that "parents care about their children, but need good clear information from educators in order to remain involved in their children's education from preschool through high school" (p. 117). School leaders need to create structures and procedures in schools that bridge the gap between parents and educators and promote schools conducive to parent involvement.

Many parents, especially parents of students at risk of early school dropout, often lack the knowledge or understanding of how to help their children be successful in school (Epstein, 2001; Espinosa, 1995). School leaders need to establish a structure to involve parents in the school. An effective school-based parental involvement program focused on helping increase student achievement works off the basic principle that involving parents will promote the success of at-risk students. A parental involvement program also works to bring parents into the school setting by encouraging them to participate in school events and activities, providing assistance in classrooms, or assisting with school events (Bridgeland et al., 2010).

Effective school leaders make a deliberate effort to develop a close working relationship, which includes open communication, understanding and collaboration among teachers, parents, and students (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Schargel et al., 2007). Parents who speak other languages need to feel

welcomed and connected with the school in order to be more involved with the school and their child's education. One-on-one communication in a parent's native language "is an essential ingredient in helping them help their child and to feel welcome" (Espinosa, 1995, p. 2). Helping to support parental strengths is essential in building trust and gaining confidence with all parents, but especially with parents of at-risk students. As the frequency of parent involvement increases, parents are better able to understand the schools' expectations for their children and how to help (Epstein, 2001). It is critical for school leaders to put structures in place that not only keep parents informed but also provide access to needed information or resources to support parents in helping their children succeed.

Community outreach. Successful school leaders understand that schools are an integral part of the community. Schools cannot do the job of educating alone but need the support of community businesses and organizations. Many community partnerships provide materials and resources for students of poverty as well as tutors and mentors for students at risk of early school dropout. "Good school-community practices can enhance the public's perception of the school" (Schargel et al., 2007, p. 101). Effective school leaders know that an "effective school-community plan must be systematic, comprehensive, achievable, and ongoing" (Schargel et al., 2007, p. 101).

School administrators must play a vital role in ensuring that senior citizens see the school as a vital asset (Hodgkinson, 2000). According to the

Administration on Aging Website (2011) in 2000, people 65+ years represented 12.4% of the population; however, by the year 2030, this same age group is expected to grow to be 19% of the population (Administration on Aging, 2011). Recent legislation requires community input into school decision-making; however, only one household in four has a child of public school age (Hodgkinson, 2000). “The purpose of school-community collaboration is to directly improve and enhance learning opportunities for students, thereby boosting their achievement” (Schargel et al., 2007, p. 101). Through developing strong school-community relationships, a school can better understand the students it serves. Therefore, leaders who open lines of communication between communities and schools build a mutual respect and encourage a win-win situation (Pawlas, 2005). Strong school administrators find a way to connect the community to student learning and are able to build relationships as a result.

Micro-political Leadership

According to the North Carolina School Board of Education (2006), “The school executive will build systems and relationships that utilize the staff’s diversity, encourage constructive ideological conflict in order to leverage staff expertise, power and influence to realize the school’s vision for success” (p. 8). Within this leadership standard, the school executive must “creatively employ an awareness of staff’s professional needs, issues, and interests to build social cohesion and to facilitate distributed governance and shared decision-making” (NCSBE, 2006, p. 8). Two important school executive practices in the micro-

political leadership strand are distributed governance and shared decision-making and high visibility.

Distributed governance and shared decision-making. Successful school leaders understand the importance of involving others in the “design and implementation of important decisions and policies” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 51). Silins, Mulford, and Zarins (2002) noted the positive correlation of a school’s effectiveness with the extent that teachers participate in school decision-making. It is the role of the leader to lead with a clear vision and to ensure that all decisions are student focused. The Wallace Foundation (2011) found a positive relationship between shared decision-making and student achievement. Utilizing leadership teams in decision-making is one example of distributed governance and shared consensus (Marzano et al., 2005).

High visibility. “Visibility addresses the extent to which the school leader has contact and interacts with teachers, students, and parents” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 61). Effective leaders are in classrooms daily monitoring instruction, supporting teachers, and interacting with students (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011). High visibility is particularly important for at-risk students and families. Visibility allows principals who are intent on promoting growth in students and adults to provide ongoing and frequent feedback (The Wallace Foundation, 2011). Being visible and available “communicates the message that the principal is interested and engaged in the daily operations of the school and it provides opportunities for the principal to

interact with teachers and students regarding substantive issues” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 61). Intentional visibility increases the opportunities for the principal to interact with teachers, students, and parents (Marzano et al., 2005; The Wallace Foundation, 2011). Although high visibility is often associated with instructional leadership, this is also a trait of effective micro-political leaders. Visibility allows for principals’ accessibility, an increased awareness of potential concerns, improved communication with the school community, and well-developed relationships with staff, students, and parents (NCSBE, 2006).

Successful school leaders understand their responsibility in leading a productive, engaging school environment that will help students maximize their potential as 21st century learners (NCSBE, 2006). This literature review organizes many of the school leaders’ responsibilities under the seven leadership strands; however, school leader responsibilities are not fixed in one leadership strand. Although the responsibilities are initially categorized under one strand, the writer acknowledges the fact that the responsibilities are interchangeable with significant overlap and do not function in isolated categories.

Principal Perceptions of At-Risk Students

After examining instructional and non-instructional behaviors of principals as they are related to at-risk students, it is also important to consider principal perceptions of these students. Although little research exists on the principal perceptions of at-risk students, there is research on the principal’s role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students (Hodgkinson, 1988; Kowalski, 1995; Riehl,

2000; Spring, 1986). Riehl (2000) stated that historically public schools have tried “assimilation as the dominant approach to diversity and equality of opportunity through homogenization has been the goal” (p. 183). Today public schools are “more heterogeneous than ever before and are under increasing pressure to effectively educate a student body that is diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, social class, gender, national origin and native language, sexual orientation, and physical disability” (Riehl, 2000, p. 183). Literature is readily available on how schools can more effectively serve diverse populations and what school administrators can do to promote a more inclusive schooling environment that better serves diverse students (Riehl, 2000). Examining how administrators make their schools more inclusive may yield information concerning their perceptions of diverse populations. While research on principal perceptions of students at-risk students is limited, this research study is intended to gather additional data to address this limitation.

Summary

The characteristics and issues surrounding high school dropouts have been discussed in detail in this literature review. Research has indicated that students living in poverty, students having academic and behavior difficulties, students who have high absenteeism, students who have high mobility, and students who have been retained are more likely to be high school dropouts. Research has also shown that Hispanic and African American students as well as male students are more likely to drop out of school. And lastly, students who

have little to no parental support at home or who lack resources are more likely to be dropouts.

The research on the characteristics of effective school leaders, in accordance with the North Carolina Standards for School Executives, has also been described in this chapter. Research shows that effective leaders know the curriculum; they are instructional leaders. Effective leaders are visible; they are in classrooms and are easily accessible to students, staff, and parents. Effective leaders develop relationships with students, staff, parents, and the community. They have high expectations for themselves as well as for staff and students and they hold staff and students accountable for teaching and learning. Effective leaders monitor instruction; they are data driven. They utilize data to make strategic decisions on how to improve instruction for all students. They coordinate and provide professional development and resources for their staff and support them as they improve their craft. Effective leaders are collaborative with all stakeholders-- students, staff, parents, and community.

High school dropout does not happen overnight. For the most part, students do not wake up one morning and decide they are going to drop out of school. It is a process that happens over years. Students slowly disengage from the educational setting and education loses its value to them and eventually they drop out. This process happens over time.

So, what is the connection between at-risk students and effective school leaders, especially at the elementary level? Are there common perceptions of

characteristics and behaviors of effective elementary leaders that are successful with at-risk students? Are there perceived behaviors or strategies we can learn from successful elementary leaders that can be shared with K-12 administrators that may improve the academic achievement of at-risk students? This research centers on discovering if there is a relationship between the perceived characteristics and actions of effective elementary school leaders and at-risk student achievement. The research project is described in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Whatever is good to know is difficult to learn. —Greek Proverb

Conceptual Frameworks

The core of this research study is examining effective school leaders' perceptions and behaviors that impact at-risk students. During the data collection process, instructional leadership behaviors, non-instructional leadership behaviors, and principal perceptions of at-risk students were examined, as depicted in this initial framework (see Figure 1).

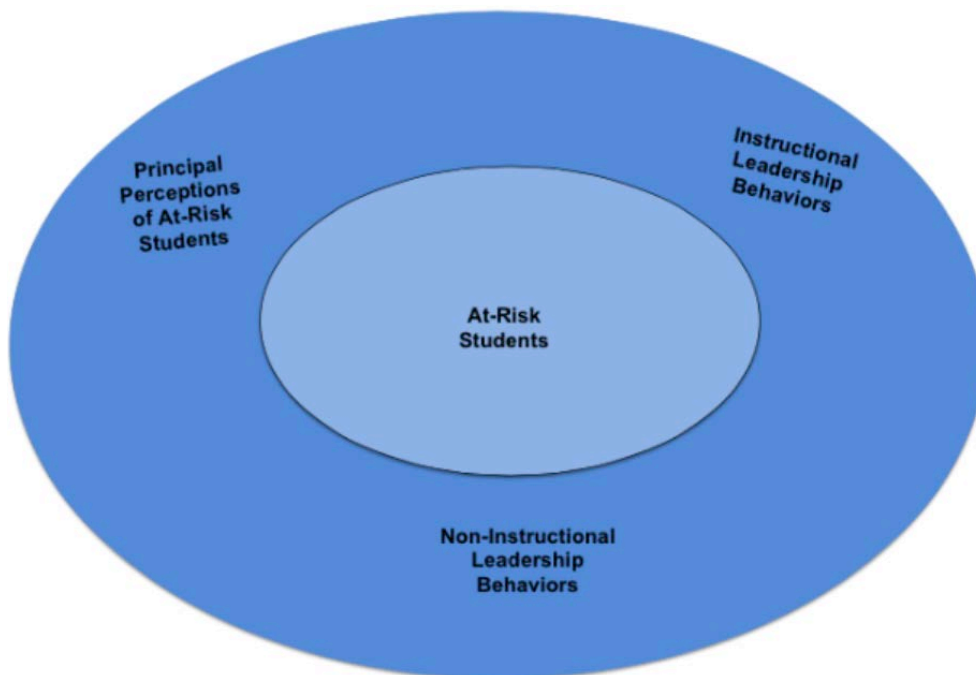


Figure 1. Initial Framework.

Significant research has been conducted on characteristics of student dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hammond et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2001) and indicators of effective school administrators (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schmoker, 2006). The following framework (see Figure 2) outlines the research-based characteristics of student dropouts.

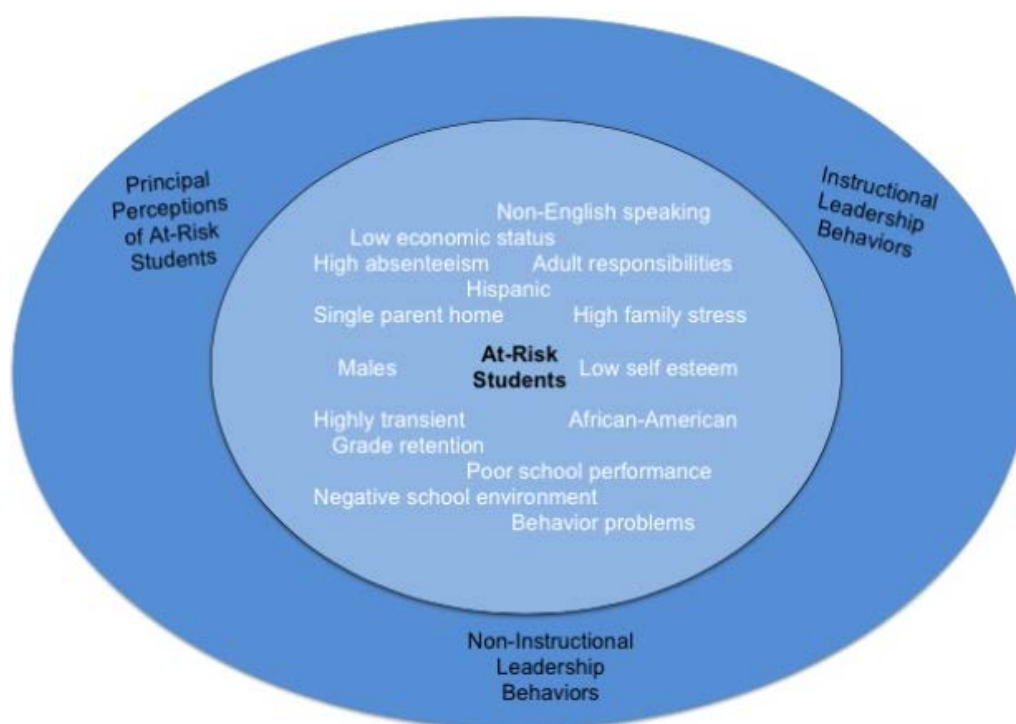


Figure 2. Characteristics of At-Risk Students.

This frame (see Figure 3) depicts many indicators of effective school administrators according to current research (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Mullen &

Hutinger, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schargel et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006).

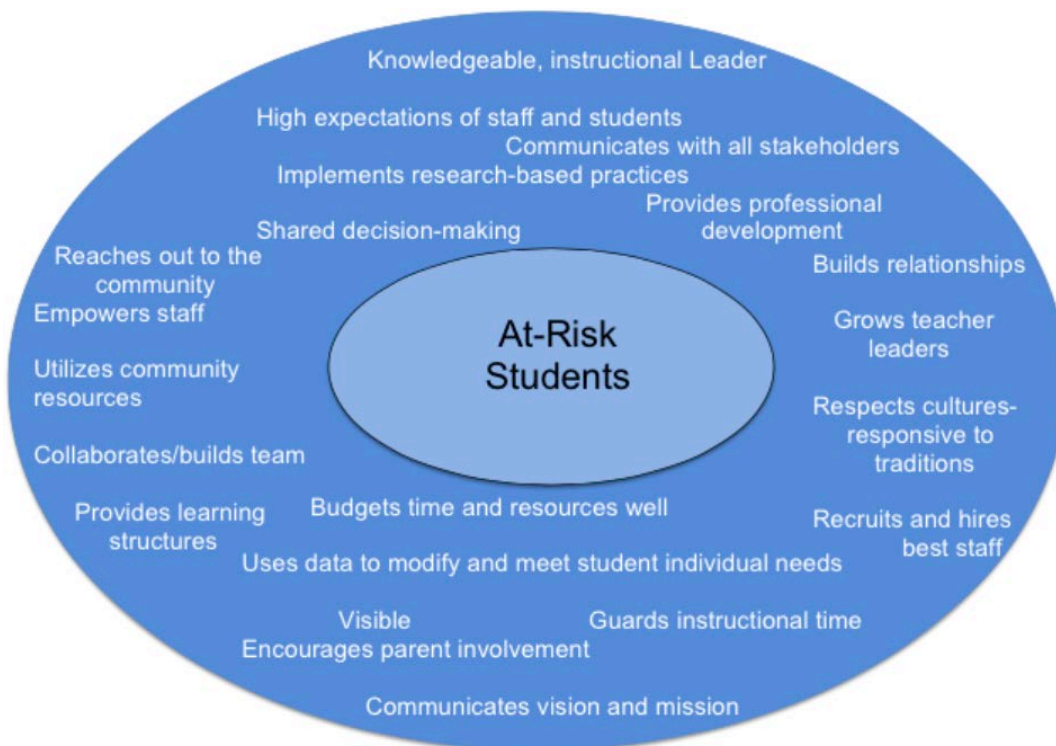


Figure 3. Primary Indicators of Effective School Administrators.

The last frame (see Figure 4) categorizes multiple indicators of effective school administrators according to current research (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007; Jensen, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schargel et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006). The indicators are categorized by principal perceptions, instructional leadership behaviors and non-instructional leadership behaviors.

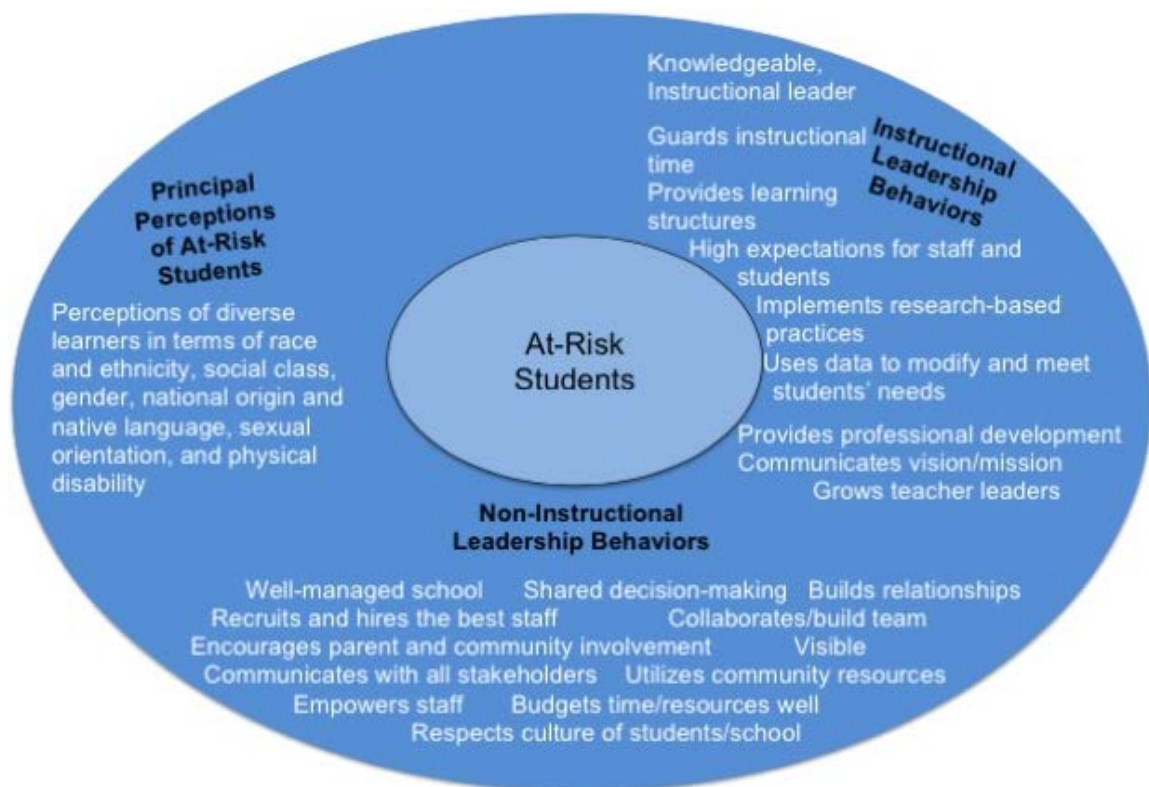


Figure 4. Primary Indicators of Effective School Administrators Divided into Categories

Research was done on the characteristics of school dropouts and the characteristics of effective school leaders. This study investigated the perceptions of effective elementary school leaders and their work with at-risk students. Were there perceptions of common characteristics, behaviors, and/or strategies of elementary school leaders that have been shown to be effective with at-risk students? Listed below are research questions that were used in this study.

Research Questions

This study investigated the following research questions:

- What are the leadership beliefs and practices that are in place in elementary schools where at-risk students are successful?
- How do elementary school leaders perceive at-risk students?
- What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?
- What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of non-instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?

Research Tradition

In order to gain a better understanding of perspectives that are common among successful elementary administrators and that promote high rates of success for at-risk students, a multisite case study was conducted. Multisite case studies “involve collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within” (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). In multisite case study research, the single case is of interest because it is part of a particular collection of cases that share a common characteristic or condition (Stake, 2006). “The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon” (Stake, 2006, p. 6). The common

category in this research study will be elementary principals who have demonstrated success at schools with high percentages of at-risk students. The inclusion of multiple cases is a “common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 40). In this research study, the four cases will be described individually within this chapter; however, in the analysis the commonalities will be discussed simultaneously.

This research study was approved by the UNCG IRB (see Appendix A) and by the school districts where the participants were employed. Each participant signed a consent form (see Appendix B). The study involved interviewing, observing, and collecting documents from four North Carolina public school principals who were recognized by their supervisors as being highly successful with at-risk students as evidenced by end of grade reading and math scores in the economically disadvantaged subgroup and had at least 75% of their surveyed staff indicating that their school “is a good place to work” as indicated on the 2012 Teacher Working Conditions Survey. All the principals were from Title I schools with a large number of free and reduced lunch students. This method was selected in order to study multiple elementary administrators with demonstrated success with at-risk students to determine common characteristics, strategies and techniques.

Utilizing multiple interviews, observations, and document analysis provided an accurate portrayal of actual characteristics, strategies and techniques employed by different elementary administrators. Comparison of the

data and compilation of commonalities of elementary administrators who were successful with at-risk students was achieved.

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected from two public school systems located in two different regions of North Carolina: (a) the Western Region, and (b) the Piedmont Region. Public school systems from different regions were chosen purposefully. The two particular school systems that were selected were due to the researcher's professional networking relationships with district administrators in both school systems. Tree City School District, located in the western region of North Carolina, has a locale identified as "city, small" while Stoneridge County School District, located in the Piedmont region, has a locale identified as "town, distant" as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Assigned locale codes provide additional information about the location of the districts and schools (see Table 3). Tree City School District has 10 schools with a total population of 4,403 students with a full time teacher equivalent (FTE) of 299.34 classroom teachers and a student/teacher ratio of 14.71 (NCES, 2012). Stoneridge County School District has 26 schools with a total population of 13,962 students with a FTE of 927.18 classroom teachers and a student/teacher ratio of 15.06 (NCES, 2012). Two public school systems from two different types of locales were chosen intentionally in order to determine common results for this research despite locale influence.

Table 3. Locale Codes of Participants' Schools

Locale Code	NCES Definition
City, Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.
Rural, Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
Town, Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.

Source: Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2012.

Superintendents and central office personnel from each district recommended educational leaders who demonstrated success in raising achievement of at-risk elementary students. End-of-Grade testing results were also reviewed, focusing specifically on the performance of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. An increase in longitudinal test scores in the area of economically disadvantaged subgroup is one evidence to identify elementary principals who have been successful with at-risk students. Review of the current Teacher Working Conditions Survey aided the researcher to select schools where at least 75% of the faculty rated the school as a good place to work and learn (NC Teacher Working Conditions Standards, 2010). Two principals from each district who met all the characteristics were recommended. The recommended principals were contacted via email to determine their willingness to participate in the research study. All four principals agreed to participate. Over the next three months, each principal participated in two focused interviews,

two observations, and provided documents that illustrated their leadership abilities.

The four principals who met the research criteria and agreed to participate in the research study were all female with a range of three to 14 and one-half years as public school principals. The selected principals were at various levels in their careers. One participant, Principal Andrews from Acorn Elementary, retired in December 2012 with 14 ½ years as principal and a total of 37 ½ years in public education. Two of the participants were in their first year at their present schools as a result of being asked to move to the schools based on their past successes. Both were moved purposefully to help improve the present schools. Principal Barton was in her first year as principal of Basswood Elementary but had successfully led another Title I school for nine years. Principal Campbell was also in her first year as principal of Cinnabar Elementary where she had worked several years earlier as assistant principal. Principal Campbell had seven years of successful principal experience in another Title I school. Principal Barton and Principal Campbell were in different situations than the other two principals; they were new to their schools and their staffs. They were just beginning to form relationships with students, staff and parents. Many times their answers in the interviews were reflective of their previous principal experiences and what they were trying to establish at their current schools. Principal Campbell was presently enrolled in the doctorate program at the local university and expressed interest in pursuing a district level position in the near future.

Principal Davidson from Diamond Elementary had the least amount of principal experience with 3 years but she too was moved to this position with a specific purpose. She was a successful assistant principal for 6 years prior to becoming principal. Table 4 identifies the specific characteristics of the selected participants. The wide range of years of experience and the varying circumstances surrounding each principal adds to the validity of this study.

Table 4. Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Recommended by Central Office personnel as being successful with at-risk students	Years of Experience as an Administrator in a Public School	TWC Question Response: "Overall my school is a good place to work"	Circumstances
Principal Andrews, Acorn Elementary	Yes	14 ½ years	79.2%	Retired December, 2012
Principal Barton, Basswood Elementary	Yes	10 years	85.7%	First Year at this school, moved by superintendent for specific purpose
Principal Campbell, Cinnabar Elementary	Yes	7 years	91.1%	First Year at this school, moved by superintendent for specific purpose; Completing Doctorate- ready for District Level Position
Principal Davidson, Diamond Elementary	Yes	3 years	86%	First Principalship, Hired at this school for specific purpose

Participants' Schools

The principals who participated in this study worked in three different types of school locales, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). See Table 3 for the descriptions of the different types of schools where the participants were employed. Two of the schools were “rural, fringe” while the other two schools were “city, small” and “town, distant”. Table 5 provides general demographic information about each school in order to get a better understanding of each school’s work environment.

Table 5. Demographic Data of Participants' Schools by NCES Locale Code

NCES Locale Code	School District	Student Enrollment	Classroom Teachers	Ratio of Teachers to Students	% Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible
Acorn Elementary: Rural, Fringe	Tree City	364	24.93	14.60	83.24%
Basswood Elementary: City, Small	Tree City	625	37	16.89	59.36%
Cinnabar Elementary: Rural, Fringe	Stoneridge County	513	34.70	14.78	51.50%
Diamond Elementary: Town, Distant	Stoneridge County	500	35.86	13.94	76%

Source: Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2012.

Research has demonstrated that dropout rates are higher in urban than suburban or rural schools (Lehr et al., 2004; Schargel, 2004) and occur in the Southern or Western regions of United States (Lehr et al., 2004; Rosenthal, 1998; Schargel, 2004; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). The four schools utilized in this study are from varying locales; however, none of them are urban and all are located in North Carolina, in the eastern United States. The researcher did not have accessibility to an urban public school district. Research has shown that public schools have higher dropout rates than private or religious schools (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 2001). The four schools in this research study are public schools. Also, research has indicated that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be school dropouts (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz et al., 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Lehr et al., 2004; McMillen & Kaufman, 1997; Orr, 1987; Rumberger, 2001; Schargel, 2004; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). As the table above indicates, all of the schools included in this research study have populations that are at least 50% eligible for free/reduced lunch. Two of the schools have populations that are over 75% eligible for free/reduced lunch. Large school size, especially for schools with large numbers of low socio-economic students, has been linked to high school dropout (Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995). Three of the four schools in this study have an enrollment of 500 or more students, which is fairly large for an elementary school. However, the student/teacher ratio is normal to low with 14-17 students per teacher.

The composition of the student body may also influence principals' perceptions and their work as educational leaders. The NCES also reports demographic data for all enrolled students for each of the participant's schools. Table 6 reports student enrollment by race/ethnic diversity for each school.

Table 6. Student Enrollments by Race/Ethnic Diversity for Participants' Schools

NCES Locale Code	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	White	Two or More Races
Acorn Elementary: Rural, Fringe	1	39	77	95	132	20
Basswood Elementary: City, Small	2	21	135	117	295	55
Cinnabar Elementary: Rural, Fringe	6	3	73	48	353	30
Diamond Elementary: Town, Distant	4	8	98	81	286	23

Source: Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2012.

Research has shown that schools with higher numbers of minority students have higher numbers of school dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Kaufman et al., 1992; Rumberger, 1995). The table above displays the number of students per school by race/ethnic diversity. The information shown indicates that two schools that participated in this research study had fairly large numbers

of students of color compared to white students and two schools that participated had less numbers of students of color as compared to white students.

School data is reported online through school report cards as part of North Carolina's Accountability Model. The school report card information for each participating school is reported in Table 7. The school status label designation is included in this information in order to better understand the proficiency levels of the students.

Table 7. Accountability Data Reported from 2011–2012 NC School Report Cards

	Acorn Elementary	Basswood Elementary	Cinnabar Elementary	Diamond Elementary
School Status	School of Progress	School of Progress	School of Progress	School of Progress
Growth	Expected Growth	High Growth	Expected Growth	Expected Growth
Reading Proficiency	63.1%	77.3%	70.1%	63.9%
Math Proficiency	77.5%	85.9%	87.6%	82.8%
Annual Measurable Objectives	Met 11 out of 15 performance targets	Met 21 out of 21 performance targets	Met 12 out of 13 performance targets	Met 17 out of 19 performance targets
Performance of Economically Disadvantaged Subgroup	51.9%	66.7%	54.8%	57.2%
Schoolwide Title 1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Adapted from the North Carolina Department of Education's School Report Cards, 2011–2012.

Dropout research has shown that poor academic performance through grades, test scores, or course failure is directly related to a student's decision to drop out of school (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001; Sparks, 2013). As the table above indicates, all the schools that participated in the study have a reading proficiency of 63% or higher and a math proficiency of 77% or higher. Three of the four schools made Expected Growth and one school made High Growth as indicated on the 2011–2012 NC School Report Card. All the schools were given the status of Schools of Progress.

Data Collection

Interviews

Two separate interviews were conducted with the four elementary school principals who had been determined to be successful with at-risk students during the data collection process. An interview protocol (see Appendix C) was utilized for all the interviews. Merriam (2009) notes that:

Interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured . . . the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (p. 90)

All of the interviews took place in the school principals' offices behind closed doors. Most interviews were conducted after school or when school was not in session. The principals set the interview times. The first interview focused

on gathering general information about the principalship and personal priorities of each principal. The first interview with each principal ranged from 1 hour 24 minutes to 1 hour 54 minutes. The second interview was used to capture a detailed narrative account of events that occurred the day before for each principal. The second interview ranged from 36 minutes to 50 minutes.

All interviews were recorded and sent to a professional to be transcribed. Once the completed transcriptions were received, they were sent back to the school principals for a member check. This allowed the principals to verify the correctness of the data. All school principals participated in the member check process. Once the school principals verified the data, the researcher de-identified the data by deleting identifying information such as school names, principal names, district names, and cities and adding pseudonyms for each school, principal, district, and city.

Observations

Observations were also used as a form of data collection in this research study. An observation protocol (see Appendix D) was utilized for all the observations. Observation “offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 136). Observations allow the researcher to record behavior as it is happening (Merriam, 2009). Stake (2010) notes that in observations,

The eye sees a lot (and misses a lot), simultaneously noting who, what, when, where, and why (as newspaper people are supposed to do) and particularly relating them to the story or the assertions forthcoming—that is, to the research question. (p. 90)

Two observations of each principal took place on two different days predetermined by the principal. All observations were conducted at the administrator's school setting. During the first observation the observer shadowed the principal during a normal day. The first observation ranged from 3 hours 10 minutes to 3 hours 30 minutes. The second observation of each principal was during a time that best demonstrated her leadership abilities, which was predetermined by the principal. In this study, the second observation included observing a principal facilitate three grade-level professional learning community meetings, observing two principals co-lead leadership meetings, and observing a staff meeting/professional development session led by the principal. The second observation ranged from 1 hour 45 minutes to 3 hours 30 minutes. All observation data were presented to the administrators for member check and were verified. All observation data were de-identified.

Document Analysis

A third form of data utilized in this research study were public record documents. "Documents are a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator" (Merriam, 2009, p.139). Glesne (2006) notes "documents and other unobtrusive measures can provide historical and contextual dimensions to your observations and interviews" (p. 68).

Documents are excellent sources of data because they are stable forms of objective yet descriptive information, easily accessible, and free (Merriam, 2009).

Administrators provided many documents that illustrated their leadership abilities. Documents included the current School Improvement Plan, examples of communication with staff, parents, and students, PowerPoints used in staff and leadership meetings, weekly agendas, and sample calendars. Identifying information was deleted from all documents. Each document was reviewed and items that demonstrated leadership characteristics were coded. Documents were used to validate areas discussed in the interviews or witnessed in the observations.

Data Analysis

By coding data collected during the interview, the observation process, and the document collection, additional insight was gained into the perceived characteristics of an effective elementary leader and the strategies and techniques an effective elementary leader utilizes with at-risk students. “A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases” (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). Principal interviews were evaluated multiple times before coding of the statements on the transcripts concerning effective leadership characteristics that principals used to positively influence at-risk students were begun. The same coding process was followed with each principal’s observations and documents.

As data were analyzed, patterns or themes of common perspectives used by effective elementary leaders emerged that were consistent across all four schools and led to conclusions. Merriam (2009) reports that:

The level of analysis can result in a unified description across cases; it can lead to categories, themes, or typologies that conceptualize the data from all the cases; or it can result in building substantive theory offering an integrated framework covering multiple cases. (p. 204)

Analysis of the data revealed the following: coding was too specific and too many themes were similar. After review of the coded data, it was determined that some of the codes could be merged under broader topics and some data could be coded under several different themes. The decision was made as to where the data best fit or if it needed to be included under more than one theme. An abundance of worthwhile data had been gathered and decisions had to be made as to what were the best data to illustrate each theme and what not to include as data examples in this analysis. All the information gathered through interviews, observations, and document reviews in the analysis were used. All of the themes discussed in this study were evident in all four schools; however, some of the themes were more evident in some schools than others. No other outlier characteristics were used in this study.

Researcher Subjectivity

Defining the participant and setting are necessary when acknowledging subjectivity in qualitative research. Throughout my career as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and district administrator, I have always worked

with at-risk students. I understand at-risk students and know that many of their disadvantages stem from factors beyond their control: poverty level, socioeconomic status, and family history. Pity does not erase the disadvantages these students face, nor is it beneficial for these students. Maintaining high expectations and providing educational opportunities can make a difference for at-risk students. My subjectivity is a factor in that I truly want to help at-risk students to be successful and I have spent many of my years in education working towards this goal. I want to discover what makes a difference for at-risk students at the administrative level and share that information with others who can use it to impact positively a greater number of students.

My own schooling and work experience has a significant impact on my positionality. I value and believe in public schools. I am a product of public schools and have always worked in public schools. As a student, I have also worked in church-based childcare facilities that were subsidized by the government to serve at-risk students. Public schools must accept and educate all students, regardless of race, sex, socio-economic status or disability. Private schools can be very selective. Public schools have a state curriculum and state guidelines that must be adhered to while private schools have much more flexibility in selecting their curriculum and their focus of study. I believe the type of educational and life experiences offered in a public school setting are very different and more realistic than those in a private school setting. Therefore, I

acknowledge my bias toward public school settings that has stemmed from my career of work in public education.

Trustworthiness

From the information collected, argument is made that the data is noteworthy in terms of its ability to determine common perspectives of elementary school administrators who are effective with at-risk students. According to Glesne (2006), "The use of multiple data-collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data" (p. 36). Establishing the trustworthiness and quality of these arguments are the result of providing rich narrative accounts and extensive coding of the elementary administrators' perspectives that are significant in the achievement of at-risk students.

Verifying that the information gained from all four sites through interviews, observations, and document review provided a consistent story triangulated the data. "Qualitative researchers triangulate their evidence. That is, to get the meanings straight, to be more confident that the evidence is good" (Stake, 2010, p. 123). Triangulation is more than being careful, it is "being skeptical that they were seen or heard right" (Stake, 2010, p. 123). Triangulation has multiple purposes and can be used to confirm the researcher has interpreted the information correctly; however, the triangulation may show there are more meanings to unpack, yielding more information (Stake, 2010). In this research study, the perspectives implemented by effective elementary leaders who had been identified as being successful with at-risk students were triangulated.

Common characteristics, behaviors, and strategies in the interview transcripts, the observation notes, and submitted documents for each elementary principal in the research study were triangulated. Next, this information was used as comparison of the four different sets of data. From this triangulation, several mutual themes that were commonalities among all four administrators were identified. Acknowledging an outlier strategy that one administrator may be incorporating is part of this triangulation process; however, there were no significant outliers in this data.

Conducting a member check following data collection addressed trustworthiness issues presented when analyzing the data. A researcher is seeking accuracy and new meaning if he presents a draft copy of an observation or interview to the person who provided the information for the interviewee to check for correction and add comments (Stake, 2010). All interview transcriptions and observation field notes were sent back to the school principals for member checks. The principals reviewed the information and verified the data. Allowing the administrators to verify the data and interpretation provided for stronger validity and trustworthiness.

In addition, as another form of member check, three current school administrators were asked to peer review the research study. Other educators and researchers who were familiar with at-risk students were used to analyze the study for validity. All three peer reviewers verified that my research seemed appropriate based on their experiences.

Summary

This chapter has described the methodology used in this research study. The multi-leveled conceptual frameworks describe the ideas behind the multisite case study. Information is provided on the selection of the participants and the participants' schools. Data were collected through multiple interviews, observations, and document reviews. The data were analyzed and triangulated and the researcher's subjectivity and trustworthiness were discussed.

The next two chapters discuss the research findings in detail. Chapter IV will discuss the principals' perceptions of at-risk students and instructional perspectives that are likely to influence positively academic success of at-risk students. Chapter V will describe the non-instructional perspectives that are also likely to influence at-risk students' academic successes.

CHAPTER IV

**RESEARCH FINDINGS: PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS
AND INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me,
and I'll understand. —Native American Saying

Principals' Perceptions and Instructional Perspectives

The purpose of this research study was to examine effective school leaders' perceptions and behaviors that impact at-risk students. Superintendent recommendations, increased scores in the economically disadvantaged subgroup on the state's end of grade test, and teacher perception of leadership as indicated on the current Teacher Working Conditions Survey were the factors utilized to choose the participants. Data were collected through multiple interviews, observations, and document reviews.

Findings in this research study have been categorized into three areas: principals' perceptions of at-risk students, instructional perspectives, and non-instructional perspectives. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and collected documents were coded to identify common perspectives among the four participants.

In this chapter, principals' perceptions of at-risk students and instructional perspectives that are likely to influence positively academic success of at-risk students will be discussed. The first section seeks to identify common

perceptions or ideas about students who are likely to drop out of school early, according to the principals in this study who have been identified as effective with at-risk students. Principal perceptions of at-risk students were gathered through questioning and observations. Perceptions include the principals' definitions of at-risk students.

The second category of data identified and discussed in this chapter is instructional perspectives that may positively impact at-risk students.

Instructional perspectives are related to the act or practice of instructing or teaching. Instructional perspectives include curriculum focus, instructional monitoring, high expectations for staff and students, and instructional strategies for at-risk students.

Non-instructional perspectives are the third category of data recognized in this study and focused on practices that are not directly associated with teaching and learning but are common among principals in this study who have been identified as effective with at-risk students. The non-instructional perspectives include relationships with students, staff, parents, and the community, communication with staff and parents, and non-instructional strategies for at-risk students. Non-instructional perspectives will be discussed in Chapter V.

Principal Perceptions

What makes a student at risk of early school dropout? According to the elementary principals in this study, at-risk students “come from different situations.” Principal Campbell states that “they (at-risk students) can be of any

color, any race.” She adds that it is hard to think of a particular characteristic because “every child is an individual and at any point along the continuum a child can become at risk.” Common perceptions include low academics, lack of parental support, lack of vision/motivation, and limited or negative home environment.

Low Academics

All of the principals interviewed agreed that students who are not successful with academics are at risk of early school dropout. Principal Barton stated that at-risk students are children “who are not being successful in school academically, behaviorally, or emotionally.” When looking at academics, Principal Campbell spoke about looking especially at the “reading piece more than math because if you can’t read, that’s everything.” She described conversations she had with her staff talking about the “awesome responsibility” elementary teachers have of helping children “read on grade level by the end of their fifth grade year.”

Lack of Parental Support

Another perception of at-risk students is that they lack parental support. Principal Andrews spoke of “worrying about those students who don’t have the support at home, not necessarily due to economics, but the lack of interest of the parents for the value of education.” The principals acknowledged that the lack of parental support might be related to their level of poverty. Parents may not be able to provide support, not because they do not care or do not want to be there

for their child, but they may be absent because they are working two or three jobs trying to provide for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

Additionally, parents may not be able to supply educational materials or to help with academics due to limited resources or limited understanding of content.

However, as Principal Andrews noted, it is significant to understand that parents who were not successful in school sometimes have a difficult time visiting school or supporting school personnel because of their history with schooling in general.

Lack of Vision or Purpose

An additional perception of at-risk students is that they lack a vision or purpose. Principal Davidson talked about students who “could not see what their future could be.” “They can’t look beyond where they are and what they see around them at home to visualize going to college.” The principals spoke of the importance in helping students see the many options that they may take in life. “They’ve got to know that there are other things out there besides what has been the situation that they and their family are in.” Principal Davidson noted “if you can get them to even consider that (other options), it’s a step in the right direction.”

Limited or Negative Environment

At-risk students may live in an environment that does not value school. When discussing students at risk of dropout, Principal Davidson spoke about students who are already “desensitized to the school environment.” The at-risk students are the ones “dealing with so much in their environment.” They are

students who “don’t like school; they may not be real successful at school; and they don’t have people in their lives to encourage them or who maybe think school is a priority.” Not only may their parents not value school, but also the environment they live in may send the message that “it’s not cool to be smart.” She spoke of students who have the ability to be successful in school but their environment tells them that “academics and being successful at school is not only not cool, but a lot of times, they get picked on for that.” In situations such as these, school is not a priority for anyone in their life, except at school. Principal Davidson continued stating that “it’s really hard to find something that looks good enough for them to give up those relationships they have outside of school,” which is why it may be difficult to help at risk students to believe in something better than their present situation.

Working with at-risk students “creates a sense of urgency” among the principals involved in the research study. Principal Campbell remarked that part of the problem is that “we just don’t know what that magic bullet is” because “there are so many factors that are in place with children who are at risk of dropping out.” Principal Davidson speaks of the necessity of making school

...a priority when they walk through the door that this is their getaway. We believe in you. You can learn. You can do anything that you want to do. You can be anyone you want to be. You need to take advantage of what we’re giving you.

She understands her responsibility in ensuring that all students have the opportunity to be successful and graduate from high school. She discusses how

they are “constantly looking for new ideas or new approaches, new ways to try to reach these kids.”

Low academics, lack of parental support, lack of vision or purpose and limited or negative home environment are some of the common perceptions of at-risk students. According to Chenoweth and Theokas (2011), understanding who these students are and the multiple circumstances surrounding them enables effective elementary administrators to better meet their instructional and non-instructional needs.

Instructional Perspectives

In this research study, instructional perspectives are related to the act or practice of instructing or teaching. Although all of the areas discussed in this section are best practices for administrators, they are especially important when working with at-risk students. Instructional perspectives include curriculum focus, instructional monitoring, high expectations for staff and students, and instructional strategies for at-risk students.

Curriculum Focus

The first common instructional category is curriculum focus. For the purpose of this study, curriculum is defined as the courses and/or content taught at the school. Within the category of curriculum focus, there are identified subcategories including the overall knowledge of curriculum, the use of data to drive instruction, the structure of instruction, the provision of resources, and the establishment of professional development.

Overall knowledge of curriculum. Effective instructional leaders have a clear understanding of curriculum (Crawford & Haycock, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006). Not only do they have a good working knowledge of content, but they can also participate in instructional discussions with staff and parents and can offer teachers instructional strategies based on current research and best practices (Crawford & Haycock, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2007). Principal Campbell discussed that when she first started at her previous school, the staff “did not have a good understanding of integration.” Working with her instructional coach, they focused on using data to drive instruction, integrating content areas, developing project-based learning, and differentiating instruction over a four-year process. “Trying to get them (teachers) to shift” was a slow but necessary process in order to meet at-risk students’ instructional needs. The staff had to have a more in-depth understanding of the curriculum and how to use student’s data to better focus their instruction to better meet at-risk students’ instructional needs.

Most of the principals were observed leading curriculum discussions either in grade level professional learning communities (PLC) or in staff meetings or school improvement team meetings. Principal Davidson met with her grade level PLCs every two weeks. She facilitated the meetings by asking questions that focused on curriculum, data, or instructional strategies. In the grade five PLC, Principal Davidson discussed the importance of “working for automaticity.” She stated the children “need to know what they don’t know” and suggested having

the students record their thinking in journals. In the Grade Four PLC, Principal Davidson initiated a discussion with the teachers about the recent decline in reading and math benchmark scores. She asked teachers “why the scores dropped and what are you going to do to reteach and reassess?”

Principals who are effective curriculum leaders are also asked to take leadership roles at the district level (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011). Principal Barton developed a literacy data-gathering tool for her school that was eventually used throughout at the district. Principal Davidson spoke of being on several district committees such as a K1 Standards-Based Report Card Committee where she was “developing the brochure to go along with the presentation to the School Board regarding moving to a new standards-based report card.” Providing input and being “in the know” were two benefits of serving on district committees, according to Principal Davidson.

It is especially important for administrators who work with at-risk students to have a strong overall knowledge of curriculum. The school/classroom may be the only place at-risk students will be exposed to academic content. The administrator must ensure that the content is appropriate, of high quality, and presented in such a manner that students are excited and motivated to learn.

Use of data to drive instruction. Effective leaders with at-risk students use a variety of data to make instructional decisions (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Data may be in the form of test scores, assessment

scores, attendance percentages, and numbers of in-school/ out of school suspensions. All of the principals in this research study discussed how they used instructional data to better meet the needs of their at-risk students. Use of data was also verified in observations and included in all school improvement plans and other forms of documentation.

Principals use student data to monitor instruction (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Jensen, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011). All of the principals discussed how teachers assess and record student assessment data in various ways, which are accessible by administrators. Principal Barton described how her teachers knew that she monitored the data. “When I go in (classrooms) to look at the flex groups to make sure that it’s based on data, they know I have that roster in my hand whether it is *My Data First* or math.” Monitoring instruction with student data and pacing guides is one way effective administrators can ensure that teachers are teaching at the students’ instructional levels.

Principals Campbell and Davidson both referenced assessment databases, which identify students at risk of academic failure, the interventions that are being implemented, and their success rates. Such information is used to assist in monitoring student progress as well as providing communication for parents on student progress and next steps. Principal Davidson remarked that her teachers “knew how she wanted the data. I want to know why. What’s the grade? What’s the test look like? Where do you see this kid struggling the

most?” Monitoring the data allows administrators and teachers to have conversations about individual student progress and needs.

Effective teachers use data to assess what students have mastered and use the information to regroup children and reteach (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005). In recalling a conversation with one of her grade levels, Principal Barton described how a group of teachers decided how they will work together to help the students who are not on grade level. They decided to “use a common assessment and retest the skills, so we’re going to reteach and then retest.” The data from the reteach/ retest was discussed at a later time in grade level PLCs. She discussed how teachers must use the data to “design a different program for the children” since they did not succeed the first time it was taught, so now “they have got to have something different.” Using the data to regroup children means that children who are at the same level or need help with the same skill or objective are grouped together so the teacher can meet with the students in small groups and better meet their individual needs. Students may be grouped across grade levels depending on their individual needs. Principal Campbell referenced a time when her grade 3-5 PLCs “ended up changing their schedules to build in a remediation time” based on data results.

All the schools have data meetings and monthly PLCs where student data are discussed and utilized in grade level planning as well as individual intervention plans. In most schools observed, the principal was the facilitator in

the PLC meetings. In the PLC meetings, Principal Davidson pulled up the data on the Smartboard or provided spreadsheets with the information from the recent benchmark analysis merged for the grade level, so the grade levels could “have an overall view of our weaknesses and strengths.” Principal Davidson admitted that the teachers “have become very accustomed to how I look at data and how specific I want to get with it.” She facilitated the discussion by asking questions and discussing with the teachers what they felt was needed in order to help the students be successful. The principal provided support and encouragement as they used the data to plan to meet students’ needs.

Principal Campbell shared a monitoring process with her grade 3-5 teachers where students used individual learning folders to monitor their own data by graphing their assessments. Using this method, students know their own data, including their strengths and weaknesses and what they need to work on. As the students master each skill, they record their accomplishments. This is another example of how effective principals work with teachers to develop ideas on how to utilize data to plan and meet students’ individual needs.

Using data to drive instruction is especially important for principals who are trying to help at-risk students experience success. Administrators must ensure that teachers are using various forms of data to correctly identify students’ academic needs and to plan accordingly to meet those needs. Students who are successful academically are less likely to drop out of school in later years. Being involved in this practice enables the administrators to better

understand at-risk students' instructional needs and to better support teachers in the process.

Structure of instruction. The structure of instruction is how instruction is organized and delivered. Such structure can include whole group, small group instructed by an adult, small cooperative groups, pairs, or individual instruction. Schools should utilize both heterogeneous groups such as cooperative learning groups and flexible, temporary ability groups to meet the needs of at-risk students (Haberman, 1991; Jensen, 2009; Knapp et al., 1990). All of the principals identified instructional delivery as a major factor in meeting the needs of students at risk of academic failure. In every school participating in the research study, individual instruction and small group instruction were highlighted as making the most difference in meeting the needs of at-risk students. Principal Andrews stated, "We do try to individualize instruction as much as we can. We were doing the small flex groups (in reading) even before Literacy First came in." Principal Campbell spoke of the "value of the interaction with an adult in a small group setting." She continued to say that the "guided reading model was certain to meet the needs of all of our kids, as well as our at-risk kids. Because what was happening, if it was a first grade group of level B's, (the instruction) was much more intense than it was if you have a first grade group of level H's." Principal Davidson stated that her school "focuses on small group regardless of the subject . . . because that's where you're going to get your best effort."

Individual and small group instruction, especially in reading and math, is more targeted at the instructional needs of the particular students in the group.

Structure of instruction was also noted in the current school improvement plans at all four schools. "Small flex-group reading and math instruction will be used to differentiate learning for all students" was an instructional strategy at both Acorn Elementary and Basswood Elementary. Similar strategies for small group instruction for both reading and math were included in the school improvement plans in the other two schools.

Small group instruction and individualized instruction were observed in classrooms at all four elementary schools. At Diamond Elementary, Principal Davidson was observed meeting with her Fifth Grade PLC. The teachers and administrator were discussing how the students were struggling with a particular math concept. The principal encouraged the teachers to "give them (the students) repetition in small groups, not letting them go to la la land (in a whole group situation)."

Small group instruction and individualized instruction requires adult interaction. All four principals discussed how they utilize instructional assistants, parent and community volunteers, and paid tutors to achieve this valued structure of instruction. Principal Barton discussed how the instructional assistants have a very tight schedule; "They are in every small group for K-5. But they are great and they have bought into it and they feel good about what they are doing."

Effective principals also think about altering the structure of instruction when considering how to meet the challenges of students who are several years behind grade level. Principal Campbell spoke about being the “barrier for these kids, we’ve got to do a better job (with this).” She described a different type of learning structure she is considering for next year for second and third grade students who are still struggling with learning to read. It is a more aggressive, reading recovery type of structure. “If we’ve got six hours of the student day, five hours of them are spent on reading and a hour on math. Because you know reading is essential.” This type of thinking on the needed structures of instruction was common among the study participants.

Individualizing instruction and utilizing small, flexible groups enable teachers to better target instruction to meet the specific needs of students in order to close their gaps in learning. The principals in this study verify that using this type of structure supports their efforts to bolster performance for low performing students.

Provision of resources. Effective school leaders in high performing schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students ensure that resources are managed efficiently (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Within the area of curriculum, provision of resources may include personnel, equipment, literature, materials, or other support.

Principal Barton stated the importance of “making sure they (teachers) have the resources, no matter what that is, if it’s personnel, if it’s materials, if it’s

just support . . . We've got to give the teachers the tools to be successful." All of the principals spoke multiple times about the need "to provide teachers what they need." Provision of various resources was listed in multiple strategies within all four schools' current school improvement plans. Providing resources and support was also highlighted in an opening PowerPoint at Acorn Elementary. The principals and teachers discussed needed resources in PLC meetings, grade level meetings, and Leadership Team Meetings. Principal Davidson and her instructional coach shared new content area resources in one PLC meeting and then asked for "suggestions for the wish list." During the PLC meetings, teachers requested special materials for specific hands-on activities such as three dimensional geometry projects and for good resources to integrate science and social studies with language arts. The administrators asked for input on materials needed and the teachers were comfortable discussing their needs and wants. One teacher came to Principal Davidson asking for help in teaching cells. She stated, "Nobody knows what they are doing." Principal Davidson spoke of the "anxiety in her voice" and instructed her academic coach to "go find something. Go to Florida, New York; find somebody that's done this and let's see what we can pull out."

Various forms of funding for the resources were identified in the school improvement documents and in the conversations with the principals. Funding sources ranged from Title I, PTA and grants to fundraisers. The central office staff recently informed Principal Barton of a \$1,000 grant her school had received

to fund literacy materials for each class. She also spoke to the leadership team about a possible fundraiser to help fund jump ropes and physical education equipment in order to be recognized as a healthy school.

Principals who want to help at-risk students be successful know they must provide resources such as additional staff, equipment, literature, and instructional materials. Additional staff or tutors are usually needed to help provide the individualized and small group instruction for students who have academic concerns. Many at-risk students do not have access at home to educational resources such as instructional materials, technology, or books. Also, teachers often need additional educational resources such as special materials for hands-on activities, technology, or content related resources to motivate and meet the instructional needs of at-risk students.

Establishment of professional development. Effective principals evaluate the needs of their staff, stay abreast of current district and state initiatives, and plan appropriate professional development (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Schmoker, 2006). Professional development may be generalized for the entire school or individualized for a particular grade level or individual staff member. Professional development may be presented in a variety of methods: a professional conference or workshop, a presentation from a consultant to the entire faculty, a presentation from internal teacher leaders within the school or district, PLCs led by the academic coach or administrator or consultant on a

particular topic, or personal observations of high quality staff within the school or at another school.

All principals in this research study discussed in great detail the importance of their role in identifying professional development needs, assessing professional development resources, providing the professional development, and conducting follow up once the professional development had occurred. Professional development through staff meetings or PLCs was observed at all participating schools and was included multiple times in multiple formats covering topics from current school improvement plans.

Implementing purposeful and focused PLCs is another way effective leaders support teachers and improve student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 2008; DuFour et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2006). PLCs were common in the four participating schools; however, they were at different levels of development. Three of the schools were in the beginning stages while one school was proficient in the structure and format of the PLC and the strategies grade levels used the data to plan. Of the three schools that were in the beginning stages, two had new principals this year and one had a principal retiring who knew PLCs would be a focus for the incoming principal. Principal Andrews discussed how she had strategically planned her master schedule to ensure “that there’s common planning time at least three times during the week” in all grade levels but that they were just “beginning professional learning community work this year.” Principal Barton expressed how well PLCs worked in her old school last

year. “It was very effective and we had six teams there with our specialist coming in.” She explained that at her new school, Basswood Elementary,

We’re growing teams and our PLCs are working. It’s not perfect. I mean, we’re planting, watering and we’re starting to sprout . . . But now I’m beginning to see they’re really linking and moving children to the groups that they need to be moved to for small group; that you’re beginning to see it really taking place and being effective. Now, it’s a work in progress.

Principal Campbell had a similar experience where the grade levels called themselves professional learning communities but their work was really sharing grade level information not looking at data, setting up instructional groups or planning to meet individual student needs. After a presentation on PLCs to the leadership team, it was decided to incorporate PLC staff development in the school improvement plan and for developing PLCs to be a major focus for the year.

The role of the principal in the PLCs is to facilitate and support the teachers (DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Schmoker, 2006). Principal Barton discussed how they had to “model it for them” at first but now “they’re running with it.” She stated, “I’m just there kind of to facilitate and say, ‘Okay, what do you need from me? What resources have you got in there? What do you need?’” Principal Davidson stated,

I facilitate. . . . My assistant principal or I are the ones who fill out the form (projected on the active board to guide the discussion). That way, I’m there and I’m engaged and involved, and it’s up on the active board so everybody sees what you’re typing in but you’re not the center, and you’re not the leader.

Being involved in the PLCs enables the principals to monitor student progress, curriculum focus, and staff needs (DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Schmoker, 2006). As noted by Principal Davidson, this is a priority for an effective leader because supporting teachers is “where the rubber hits the road.” She went on to say that participating in PLCs is “like the Holy Grail for me, because otherwise I don’t know what’s going on.”

Principals must assess the needs of the staff and make decisions concerning professional development needs for the entire staff, grade levels, and individuals (DuFour & Eaker, 2008; DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Schmoker, 2006). Principal Barton discussed how she just had to “start over” with some of the basic professional developments such as PBIS, Capturing Kids Hearts, and Literacy First that the staff should have been familiar with because they were district requirements. Principal Campbell had the same experience with professional development on effective PLCs. After she provided training for the leadership team, she advised her team leaders to “Identify something that’s relatively small but attainable that you want to move towards that direction. The expectation is not that you’ve perfected it overnight, because it’s a process.”

Another commonality among the four schools is how they utilized their instructional coach or academic coach to provide curriculum support and staff development in various group settings as well as individual coaching. Principal Campbell “re-framed the perception” of the academic coach from one of an evaluator to one that supports teachers as a curriculum coach. Using a Google

Survey, teachers signed up for a variety of unique, individualized professional development opportunities that were provided by the academic coach. These opportunities included “instructional rounds” where the teacher and academic coach observed particular instructional strategies, literacy book studies, individual assistance with planning, and modeling a particular instructional strategy. Principal Davidson discussed how her instructional coach helped her provide staff development at every faculty meeting. She discussed that teachers “don’t have time to go out and just explore things.” If one of us “sees something we really like and we think our teachers will really like it and it has (instructional value) then we bring that. That’s what our faculty meetings are.” Assessing and providing needed professional development is one of the many roles of an effective leader.

Principals who want at-risk students to be successful must ensure that their teachers are of high quality and have the skills and professional development knowledge to teach at-risk students. Administrators must be aware of their staff’s strengths and weaknesses and provide them with purposeful, focused professional development.

As documented through this research, principals who are effective with at-risk students focus on curriculum. They demonstrate a good understanding of the curriculum being taught in their schools and recognize best instructional practices. They model and demand the use of data to drive planning and instructional delivery while providing the resources and professional development

their staffs require in order to best meet the needs of at-risk students. Focusing on curriculum is an essential component of being an effective administrator with students at risk of early school dropout.

Instructional Monitoring

Another common instructional theme is instructional monitoring. Effective instructional leaders intently monitor the instructional program to make sure it is meeting the needs of all students but especially the students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Murphy et al., 2007; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schmoker, 2006). All the principals in this study discussed and demonstrated the importance of continuous monitoring of instruction. Instructional monitoring includes high visibility, consistent, informal walk-throughs and regular instructional coaching.

Visibility. All principals in this research study made it a priority to be accessible, to visit or observe in classrooms during instructional times, to participate in professional development sessions, and to take part in grade level and PLC meetings in order to support the instructional process. Principal Campbell discusses her visibility and accessibility,

I'm in all the grade level meetings. . . . I keep my door open all the time so they just come and go. I don't have a typical day but I will say at the end of every day I've had a lot of dialogue, I've done a lot of coaching.

As seen in an early morning observation, Principal Andrews greeted staff in the front office each morning in order to “troubleshoot, answer any questions that

they might have ...or they're kind enough to give me a heads up if they've had a parent inquiry or if they think a parent's going to call me." Principal Davidson expressed the frustration of teachers feeling like they are bothering her when they stop her to ask questions. "They can bother me . . . If my door is open, that means it's ok. Just give me a minute to finish my thought . . . I will turn my attention to them, but it is a very open door." Being visible and available allowed staff easy access to the principal and allowed the principal to better know the staff and students while maintaining an awareness of instruction highlights and concerns.

Principal Barton stated that "you just get out and you see people and do walk-throughs of the classrooms, connect with teachers, meet the parents and do PLCs." She spoke of the value of "children seeing us in the classroom." Principal Barton described how she asked students what they are doing, what they are learning, and why is it important. She spoke about how proud the children were when they answered her questions. When students are in differentiated small groups and they can answer her questions, it reassured her that "our at-risk children are being differentiated correctly without having to go and say (to the teacher) let me see your lesson plans. . . . I can check my data and know exactly what was going on." All principals observed and monitored instruction by being visible and discussing with all students but especially the at-risk students, what they were learning.

Informal walk-throughs. Instructional monitoring through informal walk-throughs in classrooms was noted in all conversations and observations. The length of classroom visits varied as well as the behaviors that took place during the walk-throughs. Sometimes principals took notes; sometimes they did not. Most looked at the learning targets that were typically posted in the classroom and glanced over lesson plans. Usually they looked at the students' work, listened to them read, and talked with students or teachers, asking questions concerning the instructional activity. Principal Campbell described her walk-throughs.

When I walk into a classroom, I'm looking for energy, first and foremost. You either feel it or you don't. And then I start looking around. Can I figure out, without looking at much of anything, what's going on, what student learning is occurring? What is the teacher doing? What are the kids doing? You know, monitoring those behaviors. And then if I can figure it out, then I generally don't go and ask questions of the students. At that point I would just maybe kind of monitor accuracy, based on student responses. But if I can't figure it out, or I have questions about the best instructional practice for that particular learning outcome, then I'll start asking questions. I may go look for the lesson plans.

Monitoring through walk-throughs enabled the principals to observe classroom instruction and learning.

All principals discussed how their academic coaches and assistant principals also conducted walk-throughs on a consistent basis. Principal Campbell discussed that in her previous school they had a more structured approach to walk-throughs. Each person was assigned two grade levels where they focused their walk-throughs for the week. She noted how they would "talk

about their look-fors for the week.” All the principals discussed how they gathered the walk-through data and reviewed it with their academic coach and assistant principal, identifying strengths and weaknesses and particular needs for professional development and coaching. Data from walk-throughs was also utilized in PLCs and staff meetings as teachers and administrators discussed strengths and weaknesses indicated by the data.

Instructional monitoring through the informal walk-throughs is an effective method for administrators to daily monitor and to make connections with at-risk students. Purposefully asking particular students questions and touching base with them on a regular basis holds the students accountable as well as the teachers. Both know that the administrator is monitoring the student’s progress and is expecting success.

Instructional coaching. Instructional coaching is the conversation that occurs between the teacher and the administrator or academic coach after informal walk-throughs. Coaching is a form of feedback where the administrator or academic coach gives praise for positive strategies or activities observed but then poses a question or suggestion that could improve the instructional activity (DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Murphy & Lick, 2005). Each principal discussed the importance of instructional coaching on a consistent basis; however, Principal Campbell was especially strong in this area. She stated, “If I expect the teachers to be implementing instructional strategies in the classroom

then they need to expect me to come in and give them feedback.” Effective principals spend significant amounts of time coaching on a weekly basis.

Principal Campbell commented that she feels “it’s my job to not only coach teachers, but also to coach assistant principals because if you aspire to be a principal, how else are you going to learn those skills without those experiences.” She spoke of coaching as “a process” and the importance of trying to coach staff without “overwhelming them.” Principal Campbell discussed how many of her staff had an issue with too much “teacher talk” during a lesson. During the observations, she “added up all the time that they spend talking during that time period and we had some conversations about that.” Using the data from the observation allows teachers to recognize the concern and plan possible solutions or professional development needs.

In another instance, Principal Campbell noted that a second grade teacher was struggling with vocabulary work as a center activity during small group guided reading time. The principal could not determine how the vocabulary words used in the dictionary assignment connected to the reading lesson. Back in the office, the principal sent the teacher an email praising her on the differentiated guided reading lesson but asking how the vocabulary words were determined. She also asked if she “have ever tried the Frayer Model” and attached some information and the format to the email. Principal Campbell commented that

Sometimes you can just kind of put that reflective question out there and that's enough, but what I find that seems to work more effectively with teachers is that you put that reflective question out there, but also provide them with a resource. Then they'll more likely use that resource.

Providing easy access to a resource increases the chances that the teacher will take advantage of the administrator's suggestion.

Coaching involves honest conversations and providing suggestions or possible resources. Providing model lessons, observing others who are "experts" in a particular area, researching particular models or programs, and attending particular professional development are all suggestions observed or described as the result of coaching experiences from the participating principals.

Instructional coaching must be timely. Principals spoke of the importance of getting back with the teacher within a few days of the walk-through or observation. If the walk-through is a positive instructional experience, the principal may leave a positive written note with a reflection question to ponder. Principals were observed giving non-verbal positive clues such as thumbs up and verbal thank-you's. Principal Davidson told how she would type her feedback while in the classroom and email the positive comments, reflection question, and/or suggestions so "they get it before I walk out of the room." She noted that this is "immediate feedback on what I just sat and watched." She spoke about how the teachers appreciated the feedback, "They always want to know what did you think?"

It is especially important for administrators to coach teachers who are working with at-risk students because these students have the most to learn and need the absolute best instruction in order to be successful. Having an instructional leader capable of providing differentiated feedback in order to improve instruction and instructional delivery will positively impact the academic success of at-risk students. Administrators will be more successful with at-risk students if they effectively monitor instruction by being visible, conduct consistent walk-throughs, and provide instructional coaching on a regular basis.

High Expectations of Staff and Students

High expectations of staff and students is another common theme among all the administrators who participated in the research study. Establishing and maintaining high expectations for staff and students is an essential characteristic of effective leadership (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2007). As Principal Barton stated, "I set high expectations for myself . . . My expectation for anybody is excellence every day. Every day, whether we're staff members or we're kids. It doesn't matter." High expectations for staff involved being confident, well planned, collaborative, and inclusive of parents. High expectations for students included academic success and high school graduation. Staff and students were expected to come to school every day prepared and ready to give 100 percent whether they were teaching or learning. High expectations for staff and students were evident in administrator interviews, observations, and school documentation.

Staff. A high quality staff that is confident in their abilities to help all children succeed was a common expectation of effective administrators. Principal Barton talked about making sure “highly qualified teachers are leading the children and teaching the children.” She spoke of hard conversations with staff as she helped them understand her expectation that “kids are going to be learning. Kids come first.” Being new to the school this year, she stated that the “hardest thing has been getting the teachers to believe the high expectations.” She remarked,

Our motto is ‘Excellence Every Day’ and I’ll say it on the announcement, ‘Excellence every day is the Basswood way,’ for me, for teachers, for students, everybody in the school. We all can learn every day. And we have to just keep on keeping on, just do the best we can and I think if we have those high expectations in place, I honestly believe they will fill them.

Principal Davidson discussed the importance of “choosing your staff well because that is the biggest thing you can do to help your school.” She spoke about how teachers have the most effect on the students; therefore, the teachers must “be capable and feeling like they can be successful.” She discussed how she used the theme of “Believe” the first few years in order to help instill confidence in the teachers. Their school t-shirts summed it up: “All kids need is a little hope, a little help, and somebody who believes in them.” Effective principals model such behaviors in their actions and their words for all students but especially for at-risk students.

High expectations for staff include being instructionally well prepared every day. Principal Andrews made it clear that her priority was to “make sure that the students have the instruction they need going on in their class.” In order to ensure all students have high quality instruction daily she “expected teachers to be prepared so they can do their best for students and then know how to assess the needs and then use that information to meet their needs.” Principal Andrews stated that her teachers knew that she “expected lesson plans to be on their desk in a certain place,” so she or the academic coach could easily view them when conducting walk-throughs. Principal Barton also talked about looking at lesson plans and learning targets on a daily basis. She stated, “Learning targets should always be there with your materials. That’s a non-negotiable.”

High quality instruction on a consistent basis coupled with efficient use of instructional time is another staff expectation. Principal Campbell noted that “protected instructional blocks of time” yield more time for high quality instruction. As the new principal at Basswood Elementary, Principal Barton mandated the start and end time of classes. “I immediately said classes will start at 8:30. Small groups start at 8:40. Get your attendance, get everything done between 8:30 and 8:40 and be ready to roll at 8:40 with whole group/small group. And we teach until 2:55.” Principal Davidson highlighted how her “teachers are very consistent and they’re very good at keeping kids engaged. This is the most intense place I have ever worked; it is intense and they’re busy.” Utilizing every available moment with high quality instruction leads to student success.

Teacher collaboration was another common expectation of all four principals that was observed and evidenced in school improvement plans. Most principals not only expected grade levels to meet regularly to collaborate, but also expected specialty teachers to be involved in the collaboration. Principal Campbell talked about “setting the tone of the importance of collaboration and why we need to be so dependent. And regardless of what your position is we are all equals and we all serve the same purpose, which is about kids.” All schools expected teachers to meet together at least once a week to analyze data, share resources, and plan. The principal was usually involved in each grade level PLC at least once a week. Principal Campbell stated, “If I expect the teachers to meet weekly then I expect myself to be there.” Collaboration opportunities were also provided after school, during workdays, and during summer break. Principal Davidson discussed planning a vertical teaming with the Common Core State Standards collaboration in the summer where teacher participants could trade summer workdays for workdays later in the year. Principal Davidson stated that she “traded days because I do appreciate that their time is valuable.”

All of the principals in this study discussed their expectation for teachers to communicate with all parents on a regular basis. Two principals stated that they expected staff to make face-to-face contact with all parents by the end of the first grading period. Principal Campbell stated, “One of the things that I require is a 100% face-to-face conference at the beginning of the year with all the parents, so that a teacher is making that contact.” She went on to say that they do not

release report cards for the first grading period without that contact which sometimes requires the assistance of the social worker or administration to assist with phone calls or home visits. “If a parent can’t come to us, then we go to them.” Principal Andrews noted,

Teachers have to document it for me. There’s a time frame that they are suppose to meet with every parent. And they will quickly let me know—I’ve tried three times . . . and there is a form for them to document their attempts.

Parent contact is a priority and the principals and support staff provide assistance needed to ensure that parent contacts become a reality.

Students. Just as the administrators in this study held high expectations for their staff, they also had high expectations for their students. All the principals discussed how they expected every student to be successful academically and to successfully graduate from high school. Principal Barton discussed how as administrators we must help students understand our expectations. She stated,

Well first of all, I think we live it ourselves. We model it and we show them through our actions. Another thing is to let them know what we want from them . . . A child’s grades should not be a secret to them. They should know where they’re at, and they should know that we want to see you at 100%.

Processes and procedures were in place to help students know these expectations and to help guide students to success.

The expectation of high school graduation was evident in all schools.

Principal Andrews described how she and her staff made sure students knew this expectation.

We were the Vikings and we have the oars. They're outside of every classroom door in our building. We've got the graduating year of that grade level (painted on the oar). So they see that every morning as they walk into their classroom. And the teachers use that sign. This is going to help you get to that goal.

She starts this conversation in kindergarten. At the kindergarten orientation she tells her parents, "I just believe in graduation. That's the goal." Principal Barton also discussed how she has conversations with students regularly about graduating from high school. "And I'll tell my kids, I want to be invited to your high school graduation. Right now I'm going to put a hundred dollar bill in a card and it will be yours. I want to be there." Conversations and processes such as posting graduation years communicate the expectation that high school graduation is a priority.

Students also knew they were expected to achieve academically. The principals in this research knew their students and knew their scores. They kept up with the data and held the students accountable for their performance. Principal Campbell discussed how her students were struggling with being "held accountable for thinking." Principal Davidson talked about a recent benchmark test that her fifth grade struggled with.

I really fussed at them (fifth grade), even though it's a new test, and it's Common Core and all this. I was disappointed in their math performance. It wasn't horrible, but I just thought they should have done better. And I just went in there and told them. I said, "This is not acceptable. We are not going to let you do this. Do you understand, we will not let you fail? You will not. You can do better." And we show them. We show them, like our county, we do a county comparison and it's like everybody's fifth grade. And what percentage proficient did every school have? And I put it up on a bar graph, and throw it up on the screen. And say, "Okay here's where we are. Where do we want to be? Y'all can do better than this. You are not average." That's what my kids hear all the time.

Students know Principal Davidson's expectation for academic success. She stated, "So everything that we say and do is that we expect our children to learn what they're needing to learn to go to the next level. That is our goal and that is our job." In the fifth grade hallways, motivational signs are posted "Fifth grade needs to work on 5.0 A 1." She talks about analyzing the test data and helping students know and understand what they need to improve.

Principal Davidson also has individual conversations with students. In the hallways or at arrival in the mornings, she praises students for successes and asks them about their struggles in certain areas or on particular assessments. She knows her students' strengths and struggles and the students know she knows. Principal Davidson discussed how she and her staff emphasize to their students daily "we believe in you. You can learn. You can do anything that you want to do. You can be anything that you want to be. You need to take advantage of what we're giving you." Helping students believe they can be successful is vital to their success.

Principal Barton says that regardless of where students come from or what their prior experiences may be, students can learn.

You've got to find out where they're at, but you still can't lower the rigor. You're going to go to vocabulary for any at-risk kid, whether they're Black, they're ESL, they're White, they're in poverty, whatever; it's really coming down, honestly, to the same thing. And we just find that and you do it. You just find the tools and you use them and you teach it.

She goes on to say that students are "not too poor to learn." She discusses how educators can and must "deride some background mileage" by utilizing instructional strategies to enhance background knowledge.

Effective administrators believe in student success and devise ways to help all students, but especially at-risk students, be successful. Holding high expectations for staff and all students supports this process.

Instructional Strategies Used with At-Risk Students

There were two common instructional strategies that the principals in this study utilized with at-risk students. The strategies included providing individual or small group tutoring during or after school and flexible groupings within the regular classroom.

Tutoring. All of the schools utilized individual or small group tutoring either during the day or after school. Tutoring for at-risk students was a strategy included multiple times in all four school improvement plans. Paid tutors, volunteers from local civic organizations and churches, high school students, a university professor, retired teachers, and parent volunteers provided tutoring.

Principal Barton commented on the many different tutoring resources they have in place at her school.

We've got three retired teachers to come in and tutor 5 ½ hours a day in reading and math and then we have the Math Club from the high school comes over; the Latin Club comes with tutors and reads with the children. The children from our alternative school come over and they bring E readers . . . We have a church group that comes in and reads with them and then we have a Sunday School class that just started on the 21st. They're coming in and spending an hour a day with them. Sometimes they're bringing a lunch and make them feel really special.

In school and after-school tutoring gave the students the extra practice they needed to improve or master a skill. Tutoring was over and beyond the daily instruction and may be in any of the core subjects; however, reading tutorial was the most common.

Principal Davidson shared how their after-school tutoring was teacher driven and was completely related to data. The tutoring was called “student workshops” and students who need that skill were “invited” to attend. Principal Davidson stated, “When you put it in that vernacular, and you don’t call it tutoring and you don’t call it remediation, you are amazed at the ones that come because it’s a workshop.” Regardless of what it was called, the end result was the same. Students attended and received additional instruction on the needed skill.

Flexible grouping. Another instructional strategy that was common in all the schools was flexible grouping within the regular instructional day. Flexible grouping covered any content area and was based on assessments that helped teachers identify students’ weak skills. Students were placed in small groups

based on particular skill needs and then provided focused instruction in that particular area and then reassessed. Flexible grouping occurred within a classroom, across a grade level, or across the school. Usually it involved strategically utilizing all staff including teacher assistants, specialty teachers, administrators and sometimes, paid tutors. Principal Davidson shared that the teacher assistants are shared among all the grade levels. “We do small group reading and small group math. So they (teacher assistants) focus in third, fourth and fifth on the reading and math. And their groups are determined by data.” Flexible grouping was one way of individualizing instruction based on data in order to drill down the curriculum to meet individual student needs.

Summary

Although any child can be at risk, research findings in this study indicate that common principal perceptions of at-risk students include low academics, lack of parental support, lack of vision/motivation, and limited or negative home environment. The instructional perspectives that were revealed in this research demonstrated that leaders who are effective with at-risk students focus on the curriculum, monitor instruction, maintain high expectations for staff and students, and utilize small group and flexible group instruction. However, there are also non-instructional perspectives that are also common among principals who have been successful with at-risk students. These perspectives will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

RESEARCH FINDINGS: NON-INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

At the heart of leadership is the leader's relationship with followers. People will entrust their hopes and dreams to another person only if they think the other is a reliable vessel. —David Gergen, *Eyewitness to Power*

Non-Instructional Perspectives

The purpose of this research study was to examine effective school leaders' perceptions and behaviors that impact at-risk students. In the previous chapter, findings from the four elementary school participants established that positive academic influences favorably impact at-risk students. Although principals' perceptions and instructional perspectives impact work of school leaders with at-risk students, non-instructional perspectives also surfaced in the research. In this chapter the findings related to non-instructional perspectives that positively influence at-risk students will be discussed.

Non-instructional perspectives focused on practices that are not directly related to teaching and learning but are common among the principals in this study who have been identified as effective with at-risk students. Although these perspectives may have an indirect impact on student achievement of at-risk students, findings indicate that the impact does appear to make a significant difference. The non-instructional perspectives include relationships with

students, staff, parents, and community, communication with staff and parents, and non-instructional strategies for at-risk students.

Relationships

Effective administrators understand the importance of getting to know the people in their building, the people in their community, and the parents of the students they serve (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Pagani et al., 2006; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schargel et al., 2007). Principal Andrews stated, “Honestly to me, it’s all about relationships.” Effective principals work to build relationships and establish connections with their students, their staff, the parents, and the larger school community (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Pagani et al., 2006; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schargel et al., 2007). Building relationships is especially important when working with at-risk students (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Jensen, 2009; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011). Building relationships with various stakeholders is accomplished by a variety of methods as evidenced in conversations, documents, and observations in all of the participating schools.

With students. All principals in this study discussed the importance of being visible and knowing students by name. As documented in the interviews and observations, participating principals were visible at morning and afternoon duty, in the hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms throughout the day. They spoke to everyone they saw, calling them by name, especially the students.

Many times the administrators would ask the students pertinent questions concerning a game the night before or a benchmark test or about their behavior. Often the administrator would bend to the child's level to speak face to face. Students gave hugs, smiles, and waves as the principals conducted their daily walk-throughs.

Greeting students every morning either in the car circle or in the front hall was a priority for the administrators. Principal Andrews was the “official car greeter.” She was at morning and afternoon duty daily opening car doors, greeting students and parents and having informal conversations. She stated, “I call it the kiss and hug line. But I know all my children by name. And I usually know the little brother and little sister and even the pet's name when they drive up.” By getting to know students and seeing them every morning, Principal Andrews discussed how she tries to prevent problems from the start if she sees a child is struggling when s/he first comes in the morning. “You can tell the minute they step out of the car. So you try to run some interference—try to turn them around before they get in the building.” Principal Davidson also talked about making the child feel like you have “just been waiting for them to get here.” She adds, “And that is huge; the relationship piece, especially with students who do not really trust easily.” Greeting students and parents daily is one way principals connect with students, parents, and families. Purposefully connecting with at-risk students strengthens the student-administrator relationship.

The two principals new to their buildings discussed how important it was for them to get to know their students and to build relationships with them.

Principal Campbell commented,

I'm still trying to learn kid's names and just trying to make those connections. But generally, the way that I kind of do that is any opportunity that I see them, especially at lunch, I joke around, "Oh, did you bring me a peanut butter sandwich?" Just trying to make those connections. Just trying to have some chitchat as much as possible. Every time I see them make sure I'm smiling and greeting them.

Principal Davidson also talked about the importance of getting to know the students and building relationships. She stated,

The biggest thing I do to prevent that (mistrust) is to make them feel like I really want them to be here. And we're going to do everything we can to help you and make you successful for next year, so that you're able to do the work and you're able to make good grades.

She talked about how she "really gets to know the kids" through greeting and dismissing the students every day and being visible in the classrooms and hallways. She watches the students and if she sees someone is having a difficult time, she talks with them or calls the guidance counselor because the student may "need to sit with her for a minute and kind of get herself together so they can focus on being at school." She discussed the importance of preventing problems by "being proactive and positive."

Visibility in the hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms is also valuable.

Principal Davidson purposefully conducted walk-throughs in the cafeteria at

different times on different days in order to talk to different grade levels of students. She commented,

It's a good way of getting all those kids in there at one time so you can just kind of go table to table. I try to do that and I target kids to go in there and talk to them, and I may even sit down with them, you know, for a few minutes of their lunch and just have sort of informal conversation in the lunchroom. It's not like a formal conversation. It's just somewhere where they can just kind of tell me what they liked or didn't like.

Principal Andrews also remarked how she often had lunch with students. She commented that she enjoyed eating with students because it was "a good way to connect with them and hear what's going on in their lives."

Principals were also in and out of classrooms on a regular basis. Principal Andrews spoke of "making connections with those who were having some issues and just popping in (and) being seen." She talked about the significance of knowing students "by name, by strength, by need." Principal Campbell discussed how she coached students during her walk-throughs as they were working on seatwork or center work as she continually tried to build relationships with her students. Principal Davidson confirmed the importance of having conversations with her students:

I talk to the kids. Not in a way where I'm blaming them, but in a way where I'm worried . . . I need to know what can we do to help you . . . And doing it that way, in a helpful way, you get a lot more out of kids.

Knowing details about students and having conversations with them regularly strengthens adult-student relationships.

Most of the principals spoke of the family atmosphere in their schools.

Principal Andrews remarked how “we call ourselves a family all the time.”

Students feel loved and know that the administrators and staff care for them.

Principal Davidson stated,

It doesn't matter who the kid is or if it's a boy or a girl or what color they are. It doesn't matter. It's like their class is like their little nest. And they're all their little chicks in their nest. The kids feel that. They feel it. I think that has a lot to do with some of our (success).

Feeling loved and secure, students work to meet high expectations of the “school mamas,” according to Principal Davidson. Principal Barton added, “You've got to let them know you care and that we'll be there for them.” She spoke of the importance of helping students connect with adults at school. She acknowledged,

It's to give the children a special relationship with adults. Everybody needs somebody that they can go to and if we can get them to commit to that person, it'll make a difference, just by checking on them. They will, and just for the person to meet them in the morning in the hallway, and say, “Get that homework done, you have a test today? Looking good,” that kind of thing just to say that to the children perks them up.

Principal Campbell also spoke about the necessity of students feeling connected.

She stated,

I really think it boils down to those connections. I really, really do. I mean we can put the best instructional practices in place, but unless they're feeling that from you then I don't think we're going to get very far with them.

Feeling cared for and connected are essential ingredients in having healthy relationships with students.

Student relationships were enhanced through recognitions at all participating schools. Students were recognized for birthdays, honor roll, Terrific Kids Awards, outstanding behavior, student of the month, Lions Awards, attendance, outstanding bus riders, contest winners, Accelerated Reader Goals, and Emmy Eagle Awards. Some awards were for individuals such as a birthday or honor roll while others were group recognitions for good class behavior or for the entire class completing homework. Recognitions occurred in assemblies, over the intercom, and in school newsletters and were posted on the walls in the hallways and cafeteria. At Basswood Elementary, honor roll and PBIS award winners were recognized in the Victory Parade March at the Honors Assembly. Principal Barton commented, "We're trying to find them doing something right, because you've got to make them feel good about where they're at." She continued to say "if you have that relationship with a child, you can make them or break them, and you build their self-esteem." Principal Davidson also discussed the importance of looking at "those successes. Celebrate them, because that's what's going to motivate people." Recognizing students and celebrating successes are an essential part of building relationships.

Administrators making connections and building relationships with students is a common factor among research participants that keeps at-risk students in school. Administrators who are successful with at-risk students know

that students who are struggling academically need to feel valued and connected and will work for someone who takes interest in them. Building student relationships through being visible and greeting students by name, taking time to get to know the students, recognizing student accomplishments, and creating a family atmosphere were common findings in this research.

With staff. Positive relationships with staff were evidenced in interviews, observations and documents such as PowerPoints, staff emails, and weekly bulletins at all the participating schools. Specific strategies for increasing “positive interactions among staff members” and “modeling and implementing Capturing Kids Hearts practices with staff members” were listed in two current school improvement plans. Principals discussed the importance of being available and visible, getting to know staff, praising and celebrating accomplishments, empowering teachers and staff and providing support.

Part of developing relationships with staff is being available and visible before, during and after school as much as possible (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005). Principal Andrews started off her day every morning before car duty in the front office greeting staff as they arrived to work. As they signed in for work, she was there asking about their families or other personal events. Teachers also knew she was there in case they had a school related question or concern. Principal Andrews also wrote a morning message on the office whiteboard for staff each morning. The message was usually reminders about special things happening that day and a positive, encouraging

quote. During the observations, principals greeted all staff they encountered in the hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms.

Both principals who were new to their schools spent time when they started meeting with staff individually or in grade level groups getting to know them personally and professionally. Principal Campbell noted the importance of meeting with her teachers and staff.

Well, the first thing that I did was I took time out this summer and invited in all of my teams, you know, into small meetings. And so I met with all my respective teams. I just kind of let them talk. And I said, 'Tell me about the things that are working well here. Tell me about the things that you have new ideas for.' With our teachers I'd say, 'what kind of anxieties do you have about the common core? What kind of supports do you need knowing we're in that transition?'

Taking the time to listen to staff and to seek their input was the foundation for relationships. Principal Campbell reflected that she "spent the first part of the year having lots of conversations."

Participating principals regularly acknowledged and valued staff input and celebrated staff accomplishments. Principal Andrews started the staff development session at Acorn Elementary by asking staff to share "good news items". Staff accomplishments were published in emails, staff bulletins, and on the Good News Wall. Staff was observed being praised for good test scores, making progress on the benchmarks, working collaboratively as a team in morning duty, and for sharing a concern with the leadership team. Principal Davidson complimented many of the grade levels for successful scores on

benchmarks. She gave them “high fives” while staff clapped for each other.

Staff was also praised for sharing information with other staff members.

Empowering staff and providing the support to be successful builds and strengthens relationships (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Mendels, 2012; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Staff members were empowered to lead at all participating schools. Principal Andrews discussed how decisions were made as a team. At Acorn Elementary, a teacher led the professional development on positive discipline strategies while teachers co-led the school leadership team meetings at Basswood Elementary and Cinnabar Elementary. A teacher compiled and published the parent newsletter at Basswood Elementary. Principal Barton discussed how you must learn your staff and trust them to lead. “Well, first of all we’re finding out their strengths and turning them loose to do—giving them the checking points, but also letting them have some freedom to do something that works.” Principal Davidson agreed stating, “They’ll (staff) walk through the fire if you support them; and if you’re positive with them, they will do anything I ask them to do.”

Administrators developing strong relationships with staff purposefully set the example and the expectation for staff to develop strong relationships with all students. This is especially important with students at risk of early school dropout. In the research findings, all administrators modeled this behavior by setting the example. Building staff relationships through being visible and available, getting to know staff on a personal and professional level, listening to

staff, celebrating staff accomplishments, empowering staff to lead, and providing support were common findings in this research. Although administrators developing relationships with staff appears not to impact directly at-risk students, it surfaced as a common factor during the research study. It is essential for at-risk students to experience positive relationships with their staff. Administrators in this research study not only modeled building relationships with their staff but also maintained the expectation for staff to develop positive relationships with all their students and parents but especially with at-risk families.

With parents. Establishing and maintaining positive relationships with parents was also evident in all the participating schools. This was evidenced in interviews and observations of all the principals and was included as strategies in most of the reviewed school improvement plans. Relationships with parents included being visible and making connections with parents on a regular basis, providing resources and services to the parents, listening and seeking feedback from the parents, and providing multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's educational experience.

Being visible and connecting with parents is an important component in establishing relationships with parents (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Schargel et al., 2007). Principal Andrews indicated that she strategically chooses to do car duty every morning and afternoon because

It's just a good way to connect to parents... That's my spot every morning. It's not rotated out. But it's really one of the high points of my day because I get to see parents and try to get to (know them).

Principal Barton also talked about the importance of “just taking time to talk to people . . . it’s like the parents on the car line or walkers, they all walk up—I made sure that I was out there, to take time to say, ‘How are you today?’”

Principal Davidson stated, “It’s more how we treat all parents. I don’t treat any parent differently as far as his/her concern for his/her student. Everybody is part of Diamond Elementary. You know you’re a Diamond Elementary family.” Being friendly and inviting and having conversations with parents strengthens the parent-school connection.

Genuine, sincere communication is essential to develop strong parent relationships (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Pawlas, 2005; Schargel et al., 2007).

Principal Barton discussed how administrators must be able to “code switch”. She described this as being able to “talk to the parents and make them feel welcome.” She continued to say,

You don’t go in there feeling like, “Oh, I’m educated now I can really tell you all this and how to raise your child.” No. You ask them, “What can I do for you? Well, tell me how to help. Is there anything I can do?”

Principal Davidson shared how she tries to “pull parents in and make them feel like you are your child’s lifetime teacher. You’re going to have them after all of these teachers have them, and we need you to help us.” She goes on to say, “If you make them (parents) feel good about their kid, a lot of them will just walk through the fire for you. They really will. And they appreciate the hard work that

goes into that.” Effective leaders acknowledge and communicate the important role a parent plays in their child’s education.

Effective administrators seek feedback from their parents (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; Pawlas, 2005). Principal Davidson talked about how difficult it can be to get continual feedback from parents. She recalled how she has reminded parents in parent meetings, PTA meetings and in automated phone calls that “We want to know what you think, I want your feedback.” She described how she randomly chose a group of parents throughout the school to call and “just checked in and asked them how it was going. And they were like what? Why are you calling? Oh, I’m just calling. I’m calling random parents. I want to see how it’s going. How’s your kid doing? How’s class?” She talked about how surprised parents were that she was just calling for their feedback. It was such a valuable experience that she and her assistant principal plan to repeat the process on a larger scale this coming school year.

All schools provided multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in their students’ education. Parents were invited to participate in curriculum related programs many with food and babysitting provided, family fun nights, school committees and volunteer opportunities. Principal Campbell stated, “We did everything other than stand upside down on our heads to try to get our parents to come out. We try to organize things that are meaningful to them, and feed them and make it convenient.”

Schools involved in the research encouraged parents to have open communication with administration and staff. At Diamond Elementary, parents were allowed and encouraged to walk students into their classrooms by just signing a paper at the front door. Students go straight to their rooms; teachers are in rooms and can touch base with parents. When the tardy bell rings, an announcement is made that it is time to start the instructional day. Parents are asked to come to the office to sign in if they have a reason to stay in the building past this time. Principal Barton also noted the importance of good parent relations. "It's communication. Again, it's about relationships. And seeing the reason for doing it, why we do it, why we must do it."

Effective principals seek out parents (Bridgeland et al., 2010). Principal Barton stated, "If they're not coming (to us), we're going. We're going to the home; we're going to their place of employment . . . We'll go where we have to go to meet them." Principal Campbell agreed, "But in the end, you're probably going to reach and get your at-risk families involved if you make an effort to reach out to them, because they're not going to come to you."

Principals in this study noted the value of developing relationships with all parents in order to work together for the benefit of the students. Findings indicated developing relationships with parents through being visible, providing resources and services, seeking feedback, and providing opportunities for parent involvement indirectly impact student success. This is especially true for at-risk

families. Developing relationships and working together with parents of at-risk students positively impact student achievement.

With community. Relationships with the community have a positive impact on schools (Schargel et al., 2007). Principals participating in the research study all discussed the importance of developing relationships with the community. Two schools included developing partnerships with private and faith-based organizations as goals within their current school improvement plans. All principals spoke of many different ways churches, local businesses, and local universities provided support for their schools.

Churches in the local communities partnered with the schools by volunteering, mentoring students, providing school supplies, sponsoring families at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and supporting the Backpack Program. Principal Davidson noted that a local church provides tutors and clerical assistance through a program called "Hand in Hand." She stated,

We have the Hand in Hand program and they are here every week. It's where a Methodist church that has a group of seniors (who) are retired or that kind of thing, but they all sign up through the church to volunteer at our school. And so we call them our Hand in Hand Volunteers, because we have a very close working relationship with this group of people from the church. They tutor; they work in my media center and they file for teachers. They'll do anything I ask them to do . . . The wonderful thing about it is they're on set schedules. So teachers know that they're very dependable and they'll be there and so they can plan to have that additional support and that has become extremely important.

Most of the schools have tutors provided from faith-based organizations.

Principal Campbell noted that one church wanted to set up buddy lunches where

members of the church were lunch buddies for some of the at-risk students on a regular basis. Buddy lunches provide some support for students who may need the additional adult attention

Local churches also provide assistance to school families in need.

Principal Andrews stated,

If there would be a family in need, we have contact people at the different churches because they've just said let us know if anything is needed. Oh goodness, we get tons of school supplies at the beginning of the year. And then families, they call us to sponsor families at Thanksgiving and on Christmas . . . It's a very giving community.

Principal Campbell also talked about how local churches provided school supplies and supported the Backpack Program where students in need took home backpacks full of non-perishable food each weekend. Principal Davidson also described how the local church completely handled the Backpack Program at her school.

One church does our Backpack Program . . . They do our Backpack Program in that they supply some of the food items, but I also supply some of the food items as we get donations and things. But they actually pack the bags. They come get the bags; they pack the bags; they bring the bags back. And that takes a lot off of somebody in my building having to do that.

Churches provide many services for schools with at-risk students. Their support with tutors, lunch buddies, supplies, and family assistance is invaluable.

Local businesses also provide resources, tutors, lunch buddies, and guest speakers/field trip opportunities for schools. Principal Barton noted "the external

stakeholders have been nothing but supportive.” She found that they wanted to know all about the school and wanted her to take them on tours and talk with various groups about the school. She stated, “You’ve got to stay involved in the community if you’re going to have them support you.” She noted that the banks, Lowes Hardware and police department would send people to tutor and be lunch buddies. “They (police officers) would come in and have lunch with the kids. They loved it when they’d see them like that’s their friends.” Principal Barton also sought role models for her African-American students. She sought out African-American professionals such as a dentist, a judge, a lawyer, some police officers, and college professors to speak with her students. She stated, “I got out and recruited them. I just went out and said, “Will you help me? I’ve got some kids that need some help. All they can do is tell me no.” Principal Barton also sought parents from her previous school to tutor and be lunch buddies with struggling students.

Principal Davidson also highlighted how the local businesses supported her school with lots of donations, speakers, and field trip opportunities. She stated,

Our businesses are very supportive. They just donate all kinds of stuff to us-Food Lion, Dollar General, Wal-Mart, McDonald’s. So we do have lots of interaction with all different types of folks out in the community. Speakers, guest speakers that come in, the local Vets. Lots of law enforcement, fire department. They’re just here all the time. It’s a busy place.

Several schools were located close to a university and welcomed interns and student teachers into their buildings. They had university professors tutor as a way to give back to the community and to practice their trade.

Findings indicated that administrators developed community relationships that provided resources and opportunities that were especially beneficial for at-risk students. Providing materials, mentors, lunch buddies, and tutors positively impacted at-risk students.

Communication

Administrators have the responsibility to build capacity for effective communication with teachers, students, parents, and community (Elmore, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Open communication with staff and parents was another non-instructional theme that was evident in all the participating schools as supported in interviews, observations, and documents. The principals in the research study acknowledged that communication is a two way process which involves listening to others. Principal Barton noted, "Listening is validating the other person's worth. You can listen; you might still disagree, but you can listen. And I think that's real important in a leader and it's something I try to do." Therefore, in order to have effective communication, an administrator not only needs to communicate clearly and often but she must listen to her stakeholders.

While discussing communication, Principal Campbell discussed how "principals set the tone." She stated,

I want to be that principal that no matter when you come to me, I am going to be that even-keel person. I'm always going to be the same. Principals do set the tone. We're going to treat each other as we want to be treated, and when we're going to talk to kids, we're going to talk to the kid like we would talk to our own, you know? And that's just how we do business. We can get things done and still treat each other with respect.

Effective administrators set the tone for open communication through communicating often and in a variety of ways with all stakeholders but especially with staff and parents.

With staff. Communication with staff was included in school improvement strategies in the current school improvement plans at most of the schools. All participating principals provided school staff with emails, written bulletins, calendars or a "Monday Memo" weekly to keep them informed of the upcoming week's events. Principal Davidson spoke of her calendar and the "Monday Memo" she provided staff every week in order to "keep people on top of things and informed because there is so much going on." Principal Davidson also talked about being transparent with her staff. "They (staff) know where I am and what I'm doing." She felt being open with her schedule helped strengthen the trust between her and her staff.

The two principals who were new to their schools this year both met with staff either individually or in grade levels when they first began in order to get to know the staff and to give them the opportunity to provide input. Principal Barton met with every staff member for fifteen minutes in the summer before she started at Basswood Elementary. She asked each person the same three questions,

“What’s been good about your school? What would you like to see change? What grade level do you want to be teaching?” Principal Barton expressed that she felt listening to all the staff has made a difference in the relationships she has been able to establish and what she has been able to accomplish. Upon her arrival to her new school, Principal Campbell met with grade levels, encore teachers, parents, and classified personnel. She asked for their feedback concerning what they liked, new ideas, expectations of the principal, and concerns. She listened to her new stakeholders. Together the leadership team organized and sorted this information and used it to develop the current school improvement plan. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to provide input and feedback and reacting to the feedback was a positive method of communicating with new school staffs.

Being visible and accessible also aided in communication with staff.

Principal Andrews discussed how she felt communication was enhanced because she was always available first thing in the morning in the office before car duty. She stated,

So I open the doors for and greet staff members as they come in and I just troubleshoot, answer any questions that they might have, something that’s popped up or they’re kind enough to give me a heads up if they’ve had a parent inquiry or if they think a parent’s going to call me.

All the principals spoke about being in the classrooms, hallways, office, and cafeteria so that teachers could access them if needed. The principals also were involved in the professional learning communities weekly or bi-weekly at every

school. Part of communication is being available and visible; the staffs were able to communicate often with the principals.

All of the principals utilized emails, weekly staff meetings, agendas, and Google Docs to collect information and share information with the staff. For example, Principal Campbell utilized a “grade level Google Doc to get suggested items for the requested supply list.” Principal Davidson discussed how she used Google as a tool to collect and distribute information. She stated,

Google is a tremendous tool . . . I just love it. I mean it does so much for me, and it saves me so much time. I get so much feedback. Like my interim Google survey . . . I mean I can print that out in a two page spread sheet for the whole grade level and we talk about it in CASA (Collaborating About Student Achievement). I mean boom, it’s right there, it’s just so easy.

Principals also utilized their leadership team to gather and distribute information to the staff members they represent.

Another part of communication is making sure that the message is clear and understood. Principal Campbell noted,

I try to be very careful about simplifying what my expectations are. Whether I’m meeting with a grade level or one on one with a teacher. When I leave, having that conversation with a teacher or a grade level, I try to come back and summarize no more than one or two things that I want them to think about.

Communicating expectations and verifying that staff understands is part of being an effective leader.

Effective communication with staff can indirectly impact the success of at-risk students. Administrators must have clear and open communication often with staff in order to ensure that the administrator's vision and expectations are in place. Clear communication with staff is especially important in respect to sharing administrator's expectations in regards to working with at-risk students. Administrators and staff must communicate often in regards to at-risk students' needs and strategies for success.

With parents. Communication with parents may also take place in multiple formats and must be timely, clear and two-way. Communication with parents was included in school improvement goals in the current school improvement plans at most of the schools. Various strategies included increasing communication through multiple means, informing parents of the Parent Assistance Module to access grades on-line, publishing ways parents can be involved in the school, and mandating parent conferences. Increasing parent communication was included in the school improvement plans through multiple goals and strategies.

Administrators were visible and easily accessible which enhanced communication with parents. Principal Campbell noted, "At our parent involvement sessions, I was always a part of that...I would have lots of dialogue." Principal Andrews discussed how she emphasized with parents at the first K-2 Parent Meeting the importance of stressing high school graduation with their children. She asked the parents, "How important is it to you that your child

graduates from high school?” She told the parents, “Your conversation with your child is not if you graduate, but when you graduate from high school. You don’t even plant the thought that there is an option. So start early setting those expectations.”

All participating schools provided parents with monthly newsletters that provided current information, celebrations, opportunities to be involved, and upcoming events. The monthly school newsletter at Diamond Elementary, The Dolphin Times, included a letter from the principal, a special dates section, reminders, curriculum information, a Character Education Section, and parent resources. Most administrators authored the school newsletters.

Phone calls and texts were another popular form of communication utilized by the participating administrators. Most of the schools employed a computerized call system that also had the capabilities of sending emails and texts. Messages could also be translated as needed. The schools utilized the calling system weekly or more often to inform parents of events and activities, expectations, emergencies, and absences. Several of the principals shared an expectation of returning phone calls and emails within 24 hours. Principal Campbell commented, “I’m a firm believer that the sooner you can reply to parents, the better off because obviously it’s a concern and it’s an emergency so I try to take care of that as often as possible.” Principal Davidson also commented on communicating with parents and returning communications, whether phone call, email or text, in a timely manner. She stated,

Our policy is we return phone calls same day, at the latest within 24 hours. So I'm always keeping an eye on that. And e-mail. E-mail has become probably what used to be the phone call issue. E-mail is amazing as a principal . . . but I get more now, because I publicize my e-mail address to parents, because a lot of times you get more information about what the situation is. And it also helps the parent to have to put it down and then you also have documentation of exactly what they told you through that e-mail. So I really encourage (them to use email). A lot of my families have it on their phones, even though they may not have it in their homes. And a lot of my teachers have started taking advantage of the texting programs that you can get where you can send texts through the PC to the parents. My fifth grade, as a whole grade level, is letting parents sign up for that, through texting. And they get a daily text from the classroom.

Principal Davidson stressed, "We're constantly trying to communicate with parents, and sometimes it's hard with us because the phone numbers are never right. They've run out of minutes or it's been disconnected." However, it was an expectation with all the participating principals for staff to communicate with parents as quickly and as often as possible.

Two of the four principals discussed how they designated a certain day of the week that a weekly folder for all communication from the school went home with every child. At Cinnabar Elementary Wednesday folders went home weekly with all school communication. When schools had a designated communication day, parents looked for the information weekly.

Direct communication about a student's academic and behavioral progress was another form of parent communication that was common among the four participating schools. Principal Andrews discussed how teachers are required to meet with the parents and write Personal Education Plans (PEP) for students who are below grade level. She stated, "The teachers are required to

write the PEP, get the parent's signature—it's sort of an agreement with the parents what they will commit to doing as well and the student, if it's age appropriate." At Acorn Elementary, parent conferences either face-to-face or over the phone, are due every quarter to discuss the child's progress. Principal Campbell also discussed the procedures her staff followed this year when students were not on grade level.

A lot of our teachers do request conferences throughout the year when there are concerns about academics . . . At our next interim reporting period (January 24), any student that a teacher is concerned about for possible retention or maybe not meeting grade level standards, we will send home a letter . . . and they are required to then follow-up with a parent-teacher conference and develop a more comprehensive plan. And they will be required to give to me what that comprehensive plan is for each child who's at risk.

Keeping parents informed of students successes and weaknesses, developing a plan with the parents, and communicating the student's progress on a consistent basis enabled the school and family to work together to help the student be successful. Principal Davidson explained how "we found that just being very upfront and honest and showing parents so they understand what the expectation is" helps the parent help the child. Clear expectations and clear communication between home and school were essential for student success.

Parents were encouraged to communicate with staff and administration. Parent representatives served on the school leadership teams at all the schools. Administrators stated that they wanted parent feedback. Principal Davidson utilized a parent input survey when making the class rolls for the upcoming

school year. Although she does not allow parents to tell her which teacher they want, she does “want to know what kind of teacher does your kid do best with? What is their favorite stuff? Are there kids that they shouldn’t be with?” Principal Davidson says the information she finds out from the parents through the parent input survey is invaluable. She stated,

I find out a whole lot of those kinds of things that you wouldn’t otherwise know through that parent input. I read every one of them. If there’s one piece of paper that parents will send back, it’s that parent input letter. They feel like I’m letting them have some say and that I care.

Communication is the key to effective partnership between home and school. Asking for parent input and listening to concerns and wishes keeps the communication lines open between home and school. Clear, honest communication that takes place often with parents of at-risk students is a valuable factor for student success. Effective leaders utilize a variety of methods and processes to ensure open communication takes place on a regular basis between home and school for all students but especially for at-risk students. Maintaining communication with parents of at-risk students may take more work and effort on the part of the administrator and teacher, but the frequent communication indirectly impacts at-risk student achievement.

Non-Instructional Strategy Used with At-Risk Students

Providing motivational clubs was a common non-instructional strategy that principals in this study utilized with at-risk students. Motivational clubs were activities that may or may not be directly related to instruction but were

motivating to students. Principal Barton discussed the importance of finding “some interests that the children have; maybe they’ve not been successful academically, but give them something to look forward to being at school for.” Being involved in motivational clubs was the hook that kept many at-risk students in school and working hard so they could participate in the extra-curricular activities.

Motivational clubs. Motivational clubs occurred at all the participating schools; however, there was a large variety of different clubs that were offered to the students. Some of the different clubs included dance, volleyball, chorus, drama, book clubs, chess, science club, robotics, Go Far Running Club, Recorder Karate, and Orff Instruments. Principal Davidson described the many different clubs offered at Diamond Elementary,

We also have lots of things that we do. I have a chess club this year. And it’s been amazing to watch these kids do that. I have a science club in first and second grade that has 63 students in it . . . We’re starting robotics in January. We have a primary and a three, four, five group that we’re starting robotics with, and that will become a competitive team. That’s our goal, for them to be able to compete. We have a first grade teacher that does a book club with her students after school . . . We have recorder Karate and music. We have ‘Orff Instruments’, we have chorus. We have art.

When asked about motivational clubs, Principal Barton stated,

We did have that (motivational clubs) at my old school and that really worked well. We had a very diverse population, and some of them we had to link them to the school. We did extracurricular activities...We had two dance teams and we had primarily started it out for at-risk students who didn’t get the chance of going to a studio to take dance. And then we had

an after school chorus; we had a boys running team—and of course we had girls on the run . . . We had a volleyball team that we started and we had an after school chorus and then a book club and that worked out really well and really motivated the at-risk kids to read. We intentionally went to after-school activities for the kids to try to link them to us . . .

She has spoken with her current leadership team about utilizing motivational clubs at her present school and hopes to start a few clubs in the fall.

Club advisors were staff, parents, or community members. Clubs met before school, during lunch, or after school. The majority of the clubs were afterschool clubs that met once or twice a week, 45–60 minutes a session.

The Recorder Karate Club at Diamond Elementary met first thing in the morning before school. Students in this club earned color belts for their different levels of mastery with the recorder. Principal Davidson noted that these students are never late for school.

Principal Davidson also spoke of several different book clubs for special groups of fourth and fifth grade students who are at-risk “not academically; they are able, but (they are) not as motivated as I would like them to be” or they are “extremely at risk because of their environment.” These groups meet once or twice a week with specialty teachers over a longer lunch break to discuss books that are specifically chosen for their situations. Principal Davidson remarked,

We use that book (*The Three Doctors*) because those kids in that book; they can connect to you. They were in worse situations than what our kids are in and they were exposed to things that were much more detrimental than what our kids generally are experiencing. It sort of shows them, in real life, that this can happen. It’s possible.

Principal Davidson discussed how they conducted surveys with the students to determine the motivational clubs they would offer each year. She also remarked how the motivational clubs do make an impact on academics. She stated,

It's amazing to watch the enthusiasm of the kids. But they also know that all of these teachers and all of these extra things are looking at their academics. And if they're not making it academically they need to be in tutoring, not in Go Far, so you've got to make the grades and that gives them a little bit of that middle/high school mentality of okay academics come first. I have to be eligible to participate, and that's how we put it to them.

Motivational clubs work extremely well to encourage all students but especially at-risk students to come to school on time and to work hard in their daily classes. The clubs give students who may struggle academically something to look forward to at school.

Summary

In this research study three categories of non-instructional perspectives were identified: building relationships with all stakeholders, maintaining open communication with staff and parents, and utilizing motivational clubs to keep students connected to school. All of the perspectives identified are characteristics of effective administrators and were identified in all four case studies. All of the non-instructional perspectives had an indirect impact on improving the academic success of at-risk students. For example, developing relationships with parents of at-risk students and maintaining open

communication positively impacted student success. Maintaining clear communication with staff and providing motivational clubs also have the same indirect effect.

The principals' perceptions of dropouts and instructional and non-instructional perspectives have been discussed in the previous chapters. The last chapter will summarize the common themes and outline the implications of the research findings, as well as provide steps for future research studies.

CHAPTER VI

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Leadership is action, not position. —Donald H. McGannon

The purpose of this study was to examine effective elementary school leaders' perceptions and behaviors that impact at-risk students. Two public school districts from different regions of North Carolina were selected. Four effective elementary principals as determined by Central Office recommendation, improved test scores in the economically disadvantaged category of the North Carolina End of Grade Tests, and high ratings on the Teachers Working Conditions Survey participated in the research study. Each principal was involved in two focused interviews, two observations, and provided documents that illustrated her leadership abilities. The data collected from the interviews, observations, and documents review were analyzed looking specifically at the administrators' perceptions of at-risk students and their perceptions of instructional and non-instructional activities and strategies that motivate at-risk students. Common themes emerging from this analysis, implications of the research findings, and steps for future studies follow.

The primary research question focused on identifying the leadership beliefs and practices that are in place in schools where at-risk students are

successful. The following secondary research questions guided the study with school administrators in the two school districts.

Research Questions

1. How do elementary school leaders perceive at-risk students?
2. What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?
3. What are elementary school leaders' perceptions of non-instructional activities and strategies that occur at school, which motivate at-risk students to improve their performance?

Interviews focused on perceptions of at-risk students and the strategies and techniques that the administrators had utilized that seemed to be effective with students at risk of early school dropout. Secondary questions centered on areas discussed in the literature review such as processes and programs for non-English speaking students, single parents, students who are highly transient, and students with disabilities. The two observations consisted of following the administrator during a typical day and observing an opportunity that demonstrated the administrator's ability to lead. All administrators provided multiple documents that illustrated their leadership abilities including their current School Improvement Plans and communications with staff, students, parents, and community. All data were analyzed through the lens of identifying common

beliefs and practices of effective elementary administrators that were perceived to affect positively at-risk students.

Elementary School Leaders' Perceptions

The elementary school leaders in this study agreed that in order to be successful with at-risk students, principals must know who the students are and why they are at risk. Principal Barton noted that at-risk students are children “who are not being successful in school academically, behaviorally, or emotionally.” Academic concerns are not always due to struggles with content but can be a result of other factors interfering with academics. These factors are multi-faceted but can include a lack of motivation on the part of the student or living in a non-supportive environment. Principal Davidson stated that at-risk students are students who “don’t like school; they may not be real successful at school; and they don’t have people in their lives to encourage them or who maybe think school is a priority.” Elementary administrators must be aware of their own perceptions of at-risk students in order to create a sense of urgency and to make better decisions to help at-risk students demonstrate success in school. According to Chenoweth and Theokas (2011), effective elementary administrators understand the importance of developing relationships with at-risk students in order to build trust and help students overcome barriers to be successful students and life-long learners.

Instructional Perspectives and Strategies

Multiple instructional perspectives were evident in the data. Effective instructional leaders have a working knowledge of content, can participate in instructional discussions with staff and parents and can offer teachers instructional strategies based on current research and best practices (Crawford & Haycock, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006). Administrators who work with at-risk students know the curriculum and are seen as instructional experts. Not only did they recognize and interpret grade level standards and objectives, but they knew good instructional strategies, effectively monitored instruction, interpreted individual student data, coached classroom teachers, led professional development, and assisted in developing instructional plans. Principal Davidson facilitated grade level PLCs every two weeks by asking questions that focused on curriculum, data, or instructional strategies. Effective administrators with at-risk students were very comfortable teaching as well as leading and often modeled best instructional practices for their staff.

Effective elementary leaders knew that good instruction must focus on students' needs and be based on data (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Monitoring instruction with student data and pacing guides aided administrators in knowing that teachers were teaching to students' instructional levels. Principals Campbell and Davidson both referenced assessment databases, which identified students at risk of academic failure, the interventions

that were being implemented, and their success rates. Principal Barton discussed how she goes into classrooms to “look at the flex groups to make sure that it’s based on data”. Monitoring of student data also allowed the administrators and teachers to have conversations about individual student progress and needs, which is necessary when working with at-risk students.

According to Chenoweth & Theokas (2011), effective school leaders in high performing schools with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students ensure that resources are managed efficiently. In individual meetings, grade level PLCs or whole staff meetings, effective administrators provided support, encouragement, and resources as staff used data to plan to meet students’ instructional needs. Principal Barton stated the importance of “making sure they (teachers) have the resources, no matter what that is, if it’s personnel, if it’s materials, if it’s just support... We’ve got to give the teachers the tools to be successful.”

Effective principals evaluate the needs of their staff, stay abreast of current district and state initiatives, and plan appropriate professional development (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; DuFour et al., 2005; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Schmoker, 2006). Principals who effectively work with at-risk students ensure that their teachers are of high quality and have the skills and professional development knowledge to teach at-risk students. Administrators identified professional development needs, assessed professional development resources, provided professional development, and conducted

follow up once the professional development had occurred. All of these strategies indirectly impact student achievement.

Monitoring instruction through visibility in classrooms on a consistent basis, conducting formal and informal walk-throughs, and providing instructional coaching were common practices of effective leaders of at-risk students. Principal Barton stated that “you just get out and you see people and do walk-throughs of the classrooms, connect with teachers, meet the parents and do PLCs.” Being visible and available allowed staff easy access to the principal and enabled the principal to better know the staff and students while staying aware of instructional highlights and concerns. Monitoring through walk-throughs enabled principals to observe classroom instruction and learning in a non-threatening manner and to make connections with at-risk students. Data from walk-throughs were utilized in one-on-one conversations with the teacher, PLCs, and staff meetings.

Effective administrators spend lots of time in classrooms and coaching teachers. Principal Campbell stated, “I’m in all the grade level meetings . . . I don't have a typical day but I will say at the end of every day I’ve had a lot of dialogue, I’ve done a lot of coaching.” Coaching involves honest conversations and providing of suggestions and possible resources. The best coaching involves multiple observations and follow-up in order to provide effective feedback to support teacher growth. Administrators must coach teachers who are working with at-risk students because these students have the most to learn

and need intentional instruction in order to be successful. Having an instructional leader capable of providing differentiated feedback in order to improve instruction and instructional delivery positively impacts the academic success of at-risk students.

Another common instructional perspective was high expectations for staff and students. As Principal Barton stated, “I set high expectations for myself . . . My expectation for anybody is excellence every day. Every day, whether we’re staff members or we’re kids. It doesn’t matter.” Staff members were expected to be highly qualified and instructionally well prepared at all times. Teachers of at-risk students must be highly qualified and well prepared because these students have the most to learn.

Teachers were expected to utilize every available moment wisely with high quality instruction so that all students, but especially at-risk students, experienced success. Principal Campbell noted that “protected instructional blocks of time” yield more time for high quality instruction while Principal Davidson highlighted how “teachers are very consistent and they’re very good at keeping kids engaged.”

Effective administrators with at-risk students also expected teachers to collaborate as a PLC and as a school to meet the individual needs of all students. Principal Campbell talked about “setting the tone of the importance of collaboration and why we need to be so dependent. And regardless of what your

position is, we are all equals and we all serve the same purpose, which is about kids.”

Teachers were expected to have open, clear communication with all parents on a consistent basis in order to work as a team to help all students be successful. Parent contact was a priority, and the principals and support staff provided assistance needed to ensure that parent contacts became a reality.

Administrators who were effective with at-risk students also had high expectations for all of their students. Every student was expected to be successful academically and to graduate from high school, regardless of background. Processes and procedures were in place to help students know these expectations and to help guide students to success. Conversations about high school graduation and the year of graduation were heard starting in kindergarten. Principal Barton tells her parents at kindergarten orientation, “I just believe in graduation. That’s the goal.”

Students also knew they were expected to achieve academically. Principal Davidson stated, “So everything that we say and do is that we expect our children to learn what they’re needing to learn to go to the next level. That is our goal and that is our job.” Data were shared with students in all the schools. They understood their academic strengths and weaknesses and knew the skills they needed to work on to be successful.

Effective administrators with at-risk students demonstrated that helping students believe they can be successful is vital to their success. Principal

Davidson discussed how she and her staff emphasize to their students daily “We believe in you. You can learn. You can do anything that you want to do. You can be anything that you want to be. You need to take advantage of what we’re giving you.” They demonstrated the value of believing in student success and devising ways to help all students, especially at-risk students, be successful.

Common instructional strategies utilized by effective leaders working with at-risk students were tutoring and flexible grouping. Tutoring was an extension of daily instruction and could be in any of the core subjects; however, reading tutorials were the most common. Utilizing data, students attended and received additional instruction on needed skills. Principal Davidson discussed that their tutoring was called “student workshops” and students who need that skill were “invited” to attend. She stated, “When you put it in that vernacular, and you don’t call it tutoring and you don’t call it remediation, you are amazed at the ones that come because it’s a workshop.”

Small group instruction called flexible grouping was another common instructional strategy effective with at-risk students. Flexible groups covered any content area and were based on assessments that helped teachers identify student’s weak skills. Students were placed in small groups based on particular skill needs and then provided focused instruction in a particular area before reassessing. Flexible grouping occurred within classrooms, grade levels or across a school and was one way of individualizing instruction based on data in order to drill down the curriculum to meet individual student needs.

Non-Instructional Perspectives and Strategies

Several non-instructional perspectives were also evident in the data.

Effective elementary leaders who were successful with at-risk students demonstrated the importance of strong relationships with all stakeholders, open communication, and provision of motivational activities.

Administrators who are effective with working with at-risk students understand the importance of getting to know the staff and students in their building, in their community, and the parents of the students they serve (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Ratcliffe & Harts, 2011; Schargel et al., 2007). They work to build relationships and establish connections with all students but especially with at-risk students. Principal Andrews stated, “Honestly to me, it’s all about relationships.” Greeting students every morning, knowing them by name, having conversations with them, and being visible at school, in the classrooms, and community fostered relationships. Principal Davidson spoke about how she “really gets to know the kids” through greeting and dismissing the students every day and being visible in the classrooms and hallways. Principal Andrews talked about the significance of knowing students “by name, by strength, by need” while Principal Barton added, “You’ve got to let them know you care and that we’ll be there for them.”

Recognizing students and celebrating their successes were also essential parts of building student and parent relationships. Principal Davidson discussed

the importance of looking at student successes. “Celebrate them, because that’s what’s going to motivate people.” Students who are struggling academically need to feel valued and connected and will work for someone who takes interest in them. Principal Campbell stated, “I really think it boils down to those connections...I mean we can put the best instructional practices in place, but unless they’re feeling that from you then I don’t think we’re going to get very far with them.”

Effective principals who are successful with at-risk students discussed the importance of being available and visible, getting to know staff, praising and celebrating accomplishments, empowering teachers and staff and providing support. An essential part of developing relationships with staff is being available and visible before, during and after school as much as possible and taking the time to listen to staff (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005). Principal Campbell reflected that she “spent the first part of the year having lots of conversations.” Effective administrators regularly acknowledged and valued staff input, praised and celebrated staff accomplishments, and empowered them to lead. Staff accomplishments were published in emails, staff bulletins, and on the Good News Wall, and staffs were observed being praised for good test scores, making progress on the benchmarks, working collaboratively as a team in morning duty, and for sharing a concern with the leadership team. Principal Barton discussed how you must learn your staff and trust them to lead. Empowering staff and providing the support to be successful built and

strengthened relationships and was common among leaders effective with students at risk of early school dropout.

Findings indicated developing relationships with parents through being visible, providing resources and services, listening and seeking feedback, and providing multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's educational experience indirectly impact student success (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Pagani et al., 2006). Developing relationships and working together with parents of at-risk students positively impact student achievement. Principal Davidson stated, "It's more how we treat all parents. I don't treat any parent differently as far as his/her concern for his/her student. Everybody is part of Diamond Elementary. You know you're a Diamond Elementary family." Being friendly and inviting and having conversations with parents strengthens the parent-school connection. Principal Barton also talked about the importance of "just taking time to talk to people...it's like the parents on the car line or walkers, they all walk up—I made sure that I was out there, to take time to say, "How are you today?"

Effective principals seek out parents (Bridgeland et al., 2010). Effective leaders with at-risk students acknowledged and communicated the important role a parent plays in their child's education. Principal Davidson shared how she tries to "pull parents in and make them feel like you are your child's lifetime teacher. You're going to have them after all of these teachers have them, and we need you to help us." Principal Barton also noted the importance of good parent

relations. “It’s communication. Again, it’s about relationships. And seeing the reason for doing it, why we do it, why we must do it.” Multiple opportunities were provided for parents to be involved in their students’ education. Parents were invited to participate in curriculum related programs, often including food and babysitting, family fun nights, school committees, and volunteer opportunities.

Community relationships have a positive impact on schools (Schargel et al., 2007). Principals effective with at-risk students discussed the importance of developing relationships with the community. Principal Barton stated, “You’ve got to stay involved in the community if you’re going to have them support you.” Community partnerships may include faith-based organizations, businesses, local colleges and universities, and civic groups. Such partnerships generated resources, family assistance, tutors, lunch buddies, mentors, guest speakers, and field trip opportunities. Principal Andrews remarked, “If there would be a family in need, we have contact people at the different churches because they’ve just said, ‘Let us know if anything is needed.’” Such resources and opportunities are great for all children; however, many of the resources were especially helpful for at-risk students.

Open communication with staff and parents was another non-instructional perspective that was evident in the data. Administrators have the responsibility to build capacity for effective communication with teachers, students, parents, and community (Elmore, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). An effective administrator not only needs to communicate clearly and often, but

she must also listen to her stakeholders. Principals who are effective with at-risk students must set the tone for open communication through communicating often and in a variety of ways with all stakeholders, especially staff and parents. Administrators, staff, and parents must communicate in regards to at-risk students' needs and strategies for success.

Giving stakeholders the opportunity to provide input and feedback and reacting to the feedback was a positive method of communicating. Part of communication is being available, visible, and willing to listen. All principals spoke about being in the classrooms, hallways, office, and cafeteria so that teachers could access them if needed. Principal Barton noted, "Listening is validating the other person's worth. You can listen; you might still disagree, but you can listen." Clear communication with staff is especially important in respect to sharing administrator's expectations in regards to working with at-risk students. Communicating expectations and verifying that staff understands is part of being an effective leader.

Communication with parents may also take place in multiple formats and must be timely, clear and two-way. Administrators were visible and easily accessible which enhanced communication with parents. They expected staff to communicate with parents as quickly and as often as possible. Principal Davidson commented on communicating with parents and returning communications, whether phone call, email or text, in a timely manner. Clear,

honest communication that takes place often with parents of at-risk students is a valuable factor for student success.

Effective leaders utilize a variety of methods and processes to ensure open communication takes place on a regular basis between home and school for all students but especially for students at risk of early school dropout. At Acorn Elementary, parent conferences, either face-to-face or over the phone, are due every quarter to discuss the child's progress. Keeping parents informed of student's successes and weaknesses, developing a plan with parents, and communicating progress on a consistent basis enabled the school and family to work together to help the at-risk student be successful. Clear expectations and clear communication between home and school was essential for student success. Asking for parent input and listening to concerns and wishes kept the communication lines open between home and school. Maintaining communication with parents of at-risk students may take more work and effort on the part of the administrator and teacher, but the frequent communication impacts achievement of at-risk students.

Providing motivational clubs was a common non-instructional strategy that principals in this study utilized with at-risk students. Motivational clubs were activities that may or may not have been directly related to instruction but were appealing to students. Principal Barton discussed the importance of finding "some interests that the children have; maybe they've not been successful academically, but give them something to look forward to being at school for."

Being involved in motivational clubs was the hook that kept many at-risk students in school and working hard so they could participate in the extra-curricular activities. Principal Davidson noted, “It’s amazing to watch the enthusiasm of the kids. But they also know that all of these teachers are looking at their academics. And if they’re not making it academically they need to be in tutoring . . . academics come first.” The clubs gave students who may struggle academically something to look forward to at school.

Multiple perceptions and instructional and non-instructional perspectives and strategies that were common among elementary administrators who were effective with at-risk students have been discussed thoroughly in this chapter. All of these perspectives are effective administrator practices; however, they are especially important when working with at-risk students. The difference between an effective administrator and an effective administrator with at-risk students is the intensity and priority of which the perspectives and strategies are implemented. Elementary administrators who are effective with at-risk students exemplify out-of-the-box thinking and do whatever it takes to help at-risk students succeed. They take the time and energy it takes to effectively lead a school in meeting the many diverse needs of at-risk students by being an intensive curriculum leader who develops relationships with all stakeholders, maintains open communication with staff and parents, establishes high expectations for staff and students, and implements various instructional and non-instructional

strategies that have been proven to be effective with at-risk students (see Appendix E).

Implications

The implications of these research findings can be applied to elementary principals currently working in public school settings, but they also apply to the larger educational leadership community. Implications, as they apply to practitioners, local and state policymakers, and the professional community of educational leadership, will be discussed.

Principals

A principal's position is multi-faceted and time consuming. Findings indicate that effective principals are deliberate in how they spend their time. Being visible and accessible at arrival and dismissal, in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, at parent meetings, and in the community allows the principal to develop relationships with students, staff, and parents while monitoring instruction, teaching and learning. Time spent getting to know students, staff and parents, including being able to address them by name and knowing little things about them as individuals assist in relationship building. Scheduling time daily to conduct classroom walk-throughs and to coach teachers as well as time principals spend leading and participating in PLCs, data meetings, and professional development positively impact teaching and learning. Choosing to spend the majority of their time with stakeholders and in the classrooms focusing

on teaching and instruction yields stronger relationships and improved teaching and learning.

Another implication from this research is how effective administrators develop relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members. The principals were visible, available and inviting to all stakeholders. As busy as they were, the principals made time to get to know their stakeholders by name. They took interest in them as people and made them feel valued and important. Intentionally taking time to have genuine conversations and making connections built trust between the school and the stakeholder whether it was a student, a staff member, a parent, or a community member. As a result of trust, stakeholders were able to work together for the common purpose of student success.

Choosing to be an instructional leader and opting to earn continuing education credits in the curriculum area is a successful way for school administrators to keep abreast of current curriculum trends and lead the curriculum initiative. Effective leaders must model and lead their staff in making sound curriculum decisions based upon student data and good instructional practices. However, they cannot model or coach staff if they do not have solid and current understanding of curriculum and instructional strategies for at-risk students. Therefore, in order to be a strong curriculum leader and to stay current on educational strategies for at-risk students, effective principals must seek current curriculum information and training on a regular basis.

Listening to stakeholders and being inclusive in decision-making is also important for administrators. Giving stakeholders the opportunity to provide input through individual conversations, advisory groups, or surveys sends the message that administration values opinions and gives stakeholders a voice. Keeping parents informed about their child's progress and seeking their input and advice reinforces to the parent that their role is vital to a child's school success. Taking the time and energy to stop and ask stakeholders "How are we doing and how can we better serve you?" may seem like a small task but can yield great results in better serving school communities.

A critical implication for better serving at-risk students is to determine what motivates them. Administrators who work to develop relationships with students and seek to learn their interests discover multiple ways to motivate at-risk students to want to learn and stay in school. If asked, students will share likes and dislikes. Using this information in planning will determine motivational clubs and activities that interest students. Involving multiple stakeholders in planning may also generate new activities. Creating a special or unique opportunity may be the incentive that at-risk students need to stay in school.

Policymakers

Presently staff is allotted to schools solely based on membership numbers. Size limits for schools do not exist beyond the capacity of school buildings. However, a question that evolved as a result of this research was: Should allotments be based on how many staff one principal can effectively

support? Should staff allotments and school size be based on the number of at-risk students served? Schools with larger numbers of at-risk students may be more effective with smaller school populations due to the increased needs of the students. Administrators can have more direct contact and build stronger relationships with staff and students if school size and class size are small and manageable. Instructional and non-instructional perspectives can be influenced by the size of the school and the number of stakeholders administrators support.

Another consideration for policymakers is the need to require educational leadership programs to have a focus on social and emotional development. Emphasis on relationship building, school culture, and effective communication with all stakeholders will positively impact future building leaders. Administrators must understand the value of building relationships with students, staff, parents, and community, the importance of learning the current school culture, and communicating high expectations for all stakeholders. A focus on such topics in leadership programs will have positive outcomes for future administrators.

Researchers

Strong relationships with students, staff, parents, and community were common in this research study. One implication for future research would be to investigate and research methods for building these strong relationships with stakeholders and determine if such relationships have a positive effect on reducing early school dropout. Also, developing relationships is a skill that needs

to be developed. Providing research on the benefits of developing relationships with stakeholders and how to do so would be beneficial for future administrators.

Studying the optimal school size, elementary, middle or high, for administrators to foster relationship building and provide maximum support is another implication from this study. The research has shown the importance of providing instructional and non-instructional support, developing relationships and making connections with stakeholders. However, future studies may focus on determining the optimal school size for providing such services.

Limitations

As with all research studies, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting results and considering implications. First, all the participants in the research study were Caucasian females. However, they were various ages and had varying lengths of experience in the principalship from 3 to 14 years of administrative experience. The participants were at various milestones in their careers including first principalship, being administratively moved to a new school to “fix it,” and retiring from the principalship. Additionally, all the principals worked in elementary settings. The focus of the study was on elementary principals; however, it may be beneficial to see if results would be similar with secondary administrators. The study also focused on successful principals. The researcher chose to focus on positive role models and did not have a group of unsuccessful principals as a comparison group.

Another limitation to the study was the small number of participants. Four participants were chosen in order to spend more time with each one. Multiple interviews, observations, and document reviews were utilized in this study allowing for a more in-depth focus on fewer subjects. The research spanned five months, and the participating principals chose the time of the observations and interviews and all of the submitted documents. However, this study was able to reflect the experiences of four, female, Caucasian, elementary administrators and was not intended to reflect the experiences of all administrators.

The time of the school year chosen for the study also serves as a limitation. The time of interviews and observation was determined by the date of the acceptance of the proposal and the participants' availability. The study was conducted from November to March, which is the middle of the traditional school year. Therefore, the researcher did not observe leadership at the beginning or the end of the school year. Even though some information concerning these time frames was discussed in the interviews, this time frame was not directly observed and as a result, should be noted.

Future Implications

Evidence of the importance of school administrators serving as a curriculum leader, developing relationships with all stakeholders, maintaining open communication, displaying high expectations, and intentional visibility positively impacts the school experience for at-risk students. As a result, researchers must consider how this information can impact public education

today. Possibilities include revising the principal interview process, adjusting principal expectations and support at the district level, and utilizing the findings in secondary settings as well as elementary.

School districts have their own processes and procedures for interviewing and hiring school principals with the recommendation being made by the school superintendent to the local school board for approval. Incorporating the findings from this study, candidates should be asked to discuss and demonstrate their curriculum understanding, their ability to lead professional development and PLCs, their skill in communicating and developing relationships with all stakeholders, and their capacity to motivate all learners but especially at-risk students. Focused questions on the areas mentioned above, including specific scenarios and application exercises in the interview process, could reveal information about these abilities. Also, more specific focused questioning of candidate's references may yield clear information on the candidate's curriculum knowledge, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. Requesting a video segment of the candidate leading a professional development session and examples of communication with various stakeholders will give the interviewers a better idea of the candidate's capabilities. Being more specific and focused on the areas discussed and requiring the candidates to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities through discussion, modeling, and documentation will enable the interviewer to have better insight on the candidate's abilities to communicate, lead curriculum initiatives, and develop relationships.

Superintendents and school district leaders must hold school administrators to higher standards in the areas of curriculum knowledge and leadership, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. Principals must know that these are areas of focus and should be reflected in the way the district office provides support for principals. District offices need to restructure their principal support programs so that school level administrators have assigned mentors, shadowing, professional development opportunities, coaching, and feedback much like a beginning teacher. District administrators must hold school principals accountable in these areas and must require them to show evidence of curriculum knowledge, good communication skills, strong relationships with all stakeholders, and high expectations for students, staff, and parents. Providing clear, high expectations, having candid conversations on administrator's strengths and weaknesses, and developing a plan for improvement with shadowing, coaching, and feedback takes time and additional resources but may yield administrators who clearly know curriculum, communicate well and develop relationships with all stakeholders, while motivating students and staff to be their very best.

The findings of this research study focused on elementary school principals. The same qualities that made the elementary school principals highly effective with students at risk of early school dropout can be generalized to secondary school principals. Knowing curriculum, developing relationships with students, staff, parents, and community, communicating often, and displaying

high expectations are qualities that all effective K-12 administrators should possess. Although most secondary schools are much larger, having multiple assistant administrators who have the same qualities will help produce similar effects.

As a supervisor of elementary principals, this research has helped me focus on the most important qualities of effective administrators who strive to be successful with at-risk students. I recognize the importance of being a curriculum leader who knows content and best instructional practices, monitors classrooms daily, and coaches staff as needed. I acknowledge the importance of utilizing student data to drive instruction and the importance of school administrators to be participants in this process. I also note the significance of the administrator remaining visible and accessible for students, staff, parents, and community and being the role model who exhibits best practice for all stakeholders.

The importance of developing relationships with students, staff, parents, and community was another highlight of this research. Making connections with at-risk students and their families and utilizing community resources to help the at-risk population impacts student success. Encouraging staff to build relationships with at-risk students and families and maintaining open communication through various means positively impacts student achievement.

I also acknowledge the value of motivational activities or clubs within the school day and afterschool to increase at-risk student achievement. Extra-curricular clubs motivate students who struggled academically. Students come

to school regularly and on time and work to improve their academics in order to participate in extra-curricular activities such as dance, volleyball, chorus, drama, book clubs, chess, science club, robotics, Go Far Running Club, and Recorder Karate. Motivation to participate increases the desire to improve academic achievement.

As supervisor of elementary administrators, I interview and hire new administrators. Resulting from the research, I know to look for administrators who are curriculum leaders, have high expectations for staff and students, value relationships, have good communication skills, and seek various ways to motivate at-risk students. As I work with current administrators, I will try to help them improve their skills in working with at-risk students by improving their curriculum focus and monitoring, developing their relationships with all stakeholders, improving their methods of communicating, and incorporating instructional strategies and motivational activities or clubs for at-risk students. At-risk students necessitate highly effective administrators, as described in this research study, to help them remain in school and be successful.

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APPENDIX A**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) NOTIFICATION**

To: Carl Lashley
Ed Leadership and Cultural Found
342 School of Education Building

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 11/26/2012

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Exemption Category: 1.Educational setting, 2.Survey, interview, public observation

Study #: 12-0406

Study Title: What Do Successful Elementary School Leaders Do that Promotes Academic Success of Students at Risk of School Dropout?

This submission has been reviewed by the above IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Study Description:

The purpose of this study is to determine common, specific characteristics, strategies, and techniques that effective elementary school administrators demonstrate to increase the learning of students at risk of school dropout.

Investigator's Responsibilities

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

CC:

Norma Maness

ORC, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA
GREENSBORO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
336.256.1482
Web site: www.uncg.edu/orc
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Carl Lashley
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
342 School of Education Building

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 11/26/2012

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

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CC:
Norma Maness
ORC, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: What Do Successful Elementary School Leaders Do That Promotes Academic Success of Students At Risk of School Dropout?

Project Director: N. Jean Maness

Participant's Name:

What is the study about?

This is a research study. High school drop out continues to be a problem in today's society. Dropping out of high school adversely impacts the student and society as a whole. Significant research exists on high school dropouts but there is limited research available concerning the role elementary schools play in high school dropouts. Research is also limited on the practices of elementary school leaders that make a difference in the academic performance and motivation of students who are at risk of high school dropout. The purpose of this study is to determine common, specific characteristics, strategies, and techniques that effective elementary school administrators demonstrate to increase the learning of students at risk of school dropout.

Why are you asking me?

You are one of the successful elementary principals from two North Carolina public school systems with at least 3 years administrative experience that have been chosen to participate in this study. The principals were recommended from their central office personnel as educational leaders who have demonstrated success in raising achievement of economically disadvantaged students. Current End of Grade test scores will be used focusing specifically on the performance of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. The current Teacher Working Conditions Survey will also be used to select schools where at least 75% of the faculty rated the school as a good place to work and learn.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

A series of questions will be asked of the elementary school principals to define their daily practices. Each principal will be interviewed twice and observed/shadowed twice. Each interview will be approximately 60-90 minutes. The first interview will ask general questions about the participants work as a principal and their beliefs and practices concerning at-risk students; the second interview will ask questions about a specific day of work as a principal. Two observations/shadowing experiences of each principal will

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also take place on two days predetermined by the principal for up to four hours each. Each principal will select time frames to be observed that best demonstrate his/her leadership abilities. Administrators will also be asked to provide documents that illustrate their leadership abilities. Documents should include the current School Improvement Plan, examples of communication with staff, parents, and students, weekly agendas, and sample calendars.

Is there any audio/video recording?

All interviews will be digitally audiotaped using handheld recorders for later information recall. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below. Data will then be transcribed into written form for later coding. The digital recordings will be deleted and removed from the media storage device once data is accurately transcribed into written form. Transcription will be conducted through a professional transcription company.

What are the dangers to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Although measures to ensure anonymity will be taken, a slight risk exists of individuals accessing the completed dissertation and narrowing down the data to the location or principal with whom the data is associated.

Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of research participants. Locations will be described in relative terms that make specific schools difficult to determine. All identifiers that could be linked to the participants will be removed. Informed Consent forms will be signed and discussed prior to each interview.

The interviews will take place in a private room behind closed doors. The digital recording containing a recorded version of the interviews (on a flash drive) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at all times unless it is being listened to by the research team members, in which case headphones will be used to listen to the recordings in order to reduce the likelihood that anyone else might hear the participants' responses. A professional transcription company will transcribe the participant' responses but will not have access to identifying information of study participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact N. Jean Maness who may be reached at (336) 438-4102.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this

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study please contact the Office of Research Compliance at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

The benefits to you and/or society may include time to reflect on your own daily practices; this may result in reflection on key decisions, critical incidents, and other important factors that frame the principalship and could potentially impact future decisions when handling similar matters. This study may benefit other educational leaders by providing insight into the types of strategies and techniques school administrators can utilize to make a significant difference in learning and success of at-risk students. Society may benefit from changes school principals make in their leadership behaviors that affect the students, families, and school communities in which they work.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

Signed informed consent forms and the recordings and hard copies of the interview transcripts, the observations and the documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the student researcher's office in the Alamance-Burlington Schools or in the supervising faculty member's office on UNCG's campus. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older

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and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by N. Jean Maness.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

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APPENDIX C
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Initial Principal Interview Questions

1. Tell me about _____Elementary School.
2. Describe your students.
3. Describe how you would define “at-risk” students within your building?
4. Tell me about your work as a principal.
5. Describe a typical day.
6. Describe your leadership style.
7. Talk about your priorities as a leader.
8. As a leader, what do you do that prevents school dropout?
9. What strategies do you use to help students at risk of school dropout to be successful? Are there special programs or services for at-risk students?
10. What do you do for students who have been retained?
11. How is student discipline in your school? What is the process in your school for handling student discipline?
12. Describe your external stakeholders and how they interact with the school.
13. Describe how you work with external stakeholders to serve at-risk students.
14. How do you get parents of at-risk students involved in their child’s education?

15. What type of parent support do you have in place for single parents or parents who had bad experiences in the past with schools?
16. What processes or programs are in place for students who are often absent or have a large number of tardies?
17. What processes or programs are in place for non-English speaking students?
18. What processes or programs are in place for students who receive special education services?
19. What processes or programs are in place for students who are highly transient?
20. What processes or programs are in place for students who have low self-esteem?
21. How do you promote high expectations for students? For parents and community involvement?
22. Talk about the role accountability plays in your daily practices.
23. How do you promote a positive school environment for staff, students, and parents?
24. How do you build relationships with students? Staff? Parents?
25. How do you build your team?
26. How do you use data with staff, parents, and students to impact instruction?
27. What are some professional development sessions you have put in place that impact at-risk students?

28. What is your vision/mission for your school? How do you communicate that with your students, staff and parents?
29. How do you know your vision and mission is working?
30. How do you use your resources?
31. How do you guard instructional time?
32. How are decisions made in your school?
33. How do you empower staff?
34. How do you build respect for the culture of students and staff?
35. Are there any other key leadership practices that we haven't touched on that play a role in your work as a principal who is successful with at-risk students?

Second Principal Interview Questions

1. Starting when you came to work this morning, walk me through your day.
2. Describe interactions you had, including formal and informal meetings and encounters with adults and students.
3. Discuss any issues that you handled during the course of the day.
4. Talk about emails or messages you addressed during the day.
5. Based on what you've described from today's events, talk about the strategies, activities or behaviors that occurred that you think positively impacted at-risk students.

APPENDIX D

PRINCIPAL OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

The observer focused on:

- A. **The Physical Setting:** What is the physical environment like? What is the context? How is the space allocated? What objects, resources, technologies are in the setting?
- B. **The Participants:** Who is in the scene? How many people and their roles? What brings the people together? What are the characteristics of the people?
- C. **Activities and Interactions:** What is going on? What is the sequence of activities? How do people interact with the activity or one another? What are the connections? Are their norms or rules to the structure and interactions? What is the timeframe of the activity?
- D. **Conversation:** What is the content of the conversations in this setting? Who speaks to whom? Who is listening?
- E. **Subtle Factors:** Are there informal and unplanned activities? Are there symbolic and connotative meanings of words? Are there non-verbal communications taking place?

Field Notes

School _____

Day and Time	Setting	Participants	Activities and Interactions

APPENDIX E

INSTRUCTIONAL AND NON-INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EFFECTIVE ELEMENTARY ADMINISTRATORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS*

Instructional Perspectives of Effective Elementary Administrators That Contribute To The Academic Success of At-Risk Students*	
Curriculum Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a working knowledge of content/ seen as an instructional expert • Coaches teachers on instructional strategies based on current research and best practices • Plans and/or leads professional development based on staff need • Facilitates professional learning communities • Utilizes student data to determine instructional strategies • Employs small group instruction based on data • Provides needed resources and support
Instructional Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectively monitors instruction and student data through visibility in classrooms on a consistent basis • Conducts formal/informal walk-throughs • Provides instructional coaching
High Expectations for Staff and Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff must be highly qualified and prepared • Staff utilize every available moment wisely with high quality instruction • Staff protect instructional blocks of time • Teachers collaborate to meet individual needs of students • Staff often communicates openly and clearly with parents • Students are expected to achieve academically • Students know their strengths and weaknesses • Students believe they can be successful
Common Instructional Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing data, students receive additional instruction on needed skills • Small group or individual tutoring during school or afterschool • Flexible grouping occurs within classrooms, among grade levels or across a school

Non-Instructional Perspectives of Effective Elementary Administrators That Contribute to the Academic Success of At-Risk Students*	
Strong Relationships with All Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships and establish connections • Be visible and accessible • Recognize stakeholders and celebrate their successes • Make stakeholders feel valued and connected • Empower stakeholders • Provide resources, support and guidance • Listen and seek feedback • Provide multiple opportunities for stakeholders to be involved
Open Communication with Staff and Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be available, visible and willing to listen • Communicate clearly, openly and often • Communicate using a variety of methods/formats • Provide opportunity for input and feedback • Communicate expectations and verify understanding
Providing Motivational Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides the hook for some students to want to come to school • Solicit student interests • Provide activities that may or may not be directly related to instruction but are appealing to students (dance, volleyball, chorus, drama, book clubs, chess, robotics, Go Far Running Club, Recorder Karate) • Connect involvement in motivational activities to academic performance in the classroom

*Leaders who are successful with at-risk students exemplify out-of-the-box thinking and do whatever it takes to help at-risk students succeed. The difference is the intensity and priority of which the perspectives and strategies are implemented.