

PITTMAN, MARVA RENEÉ, Ed.D. *Amplifying Their Voices: The Perception and Experiences of Educators Implementing School Reform.* (2021)
Directed by Dr. Carl Lashley. 173 pp.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to capture the experiences and perceptions of educators implementing the Primary School Model Program (PSM), a comprehensive school reform program at Lincoln Elementary School. The participant group included school-level administrators, school-level instructional leadership, classroom teachers, and two student support staff. The study was completed through a conceptual framework using the Primary School Model Program Policy. The PSM Policy uses four dimensions to guide the school reform at Lincoln Elementary School: instructional excellence and alignment, leadership capacity, professional capacity, families, and community. Through one-on-one interviews, the participants richly described their experiences and perceptions with candor. The primary study findings included: (a) the participants found that equity and equitable practices were key to the success of the reform implementation at Lincoln Elementary School; (b) the participants found that accountability, autonomy, and active learning was important in creating positive morale and developing the various skill sets; (c) the participants acknowledged that reform implementation can be overwhelming and required prioritization, a narrowed focus, and distributive leadership; and (d) the participants found that addressing the needs of children in crisis is important for successful implementation.

Keywords: school reform, case study, educator experience, educator perception

AMPLIFYING THEIR VOICES: THE PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCES OF
EDUCATORS IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL REFORM

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro
2021

Approved by

Committee Chair

This work is dedicated to the honor, memory, and work of my father. His dedication to doing what is right for the children of North Carolina and around the nation has always been an inspiration to me and others who were so privileged to work with him. My only hope is that this research shines as brightly as he did on his journey of school reform.

Marvin R. Pittman

May 5, 1950 – September 15, 2016

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by MARVA RENEÉ PITTMAN, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This process has truly been a journey of perseverance and strength. At the start of this process, my life changed in ways that I never thought possible, but I continued to rely on Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans that I have for you . . . plans to give you hope and a future.” There were times that I did not know how or when I would get to this point, but there are so many people that have helped me along the way.

To my mom and sister: You all have been my strength and biggest cheerleaders during this entire process, but even more so after we lost dad. You cheered me on at my highest points and encouraged me when I felt defeated and was not sure I would make it to the finish line through the tears. With such unconditional love and support, “Thank You” just does not seem like enough. I love you both.

To my personal support squad Jeri, Ayana, Clint, and Candace- having friends that *genuinely* celebrate one another and push each other to be their best is rare and something that I do not take for granted. Clint, your advice and encouragement during this writing process kept me focused on the end. Jeri, thank you for giving me “the words” and taking the time to help me be a better writer. Ayana, your constant celebration and positive outlook helped me more than you know, especially during my venting sessions through all the delays. Candace, thank you for continuing to be a friend that keeps me grounded, relaxed, and focused on even the smallest victory.

To my dissertation committee: Our time together is Jeremiah 29:11 manifested, to say the least. As I completed this educational journey, I felt that it was only appropriate to

include those who have been instrumental to my growth since I was an 18-year-old undergraduate music education student with ambitions to lead. Dr. Lashley or “Doc,” I am so grateful that I was able to take this step with your guidance and leadership as my chair. You have always supported me and guided me through my professional and educational career decisions: Thank you for your guidance and patience, this has been a long journey, but we made it! Dr. Jewell Cooper, “Coop,” I know that I would not be at this point without your “suggestion” that I get my doctorate. There were times where you know I needed the push, and you pushed me. You have always held me accountable and supported me to be excellent at whatever I do—thank you. Dr. Peck, thank you for encouraging me when I first started this writing process and teaching me to be a scholarly writer. I have learned so much from you, particularly around school reform. Thank you for serving on my committee and being an integral part of this journey.

To the hardworking educators at Lincoln Elementary School and Southeastern Public School District: Thank you! Your commitment to your children, your personal growth, and to this research study is appreciated. I learned so much from you that not only helped with my research but also helped to make me a better educator and leader. Continue to change the lives of your students- you are valued. Southeastern Public School District, thank you for not hesitating to support my research. I hope that this experience and the findings will impact your students and teachers to become their best selves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Background Context	6
History of School Reform	6
Southeastern Public School District.....	11
Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School	13
Demographic and Academic Data	13
Personnel Data	14
Structure of Primary School Model Reform Program	15
Significance of Study	19
Brief Methods Description.....	20
Summary and Overview	21
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	24
The Reality of Low Performing Schools	27
School Geography and Resegregation	27
Quality Assurance: Learning, Teaching and Leading.....	31
Teacher Turnover.....	32
School Reform	34
Federal Reform Programs	35
School Reform Models	39
Turnaround Model	41
Reform Personnel.....	42
Reform Instructional Practice	43
Restart Reform Model/Conversion Charters	44
School Closure	46
Student Impact	47
Teacher Impact.....	48
Parent and Community Impact	48
Comprehensive School Reform Model.....	49

Educator Perception and School Reform	51
Professional Development	52
Working Conditions.....	54
Literature Review Summary and Overview	56
III. STUDY METHODOLOGY	58
Research Questions.....	58
Unit of Analysis	59
Preliminary Study	60
Interviews.....	61
Documents	61
Initial Findings and Lessons Learned	62
Research Design.....	62
Research Method Litmus Test and Justification.....	63
Study Setting.....	64
Participants.....	65
Data Collection Methods	67
Interviews.....	67
Interviews and the Conceptual Framework	68
Document Analysis.....	69
Public Records	70
Context of Data Collection	70
Data Analysis Strategies	71
Coding and Category Construction.....	72
Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations	74
Triangulation.....	74
Member Checks	75
Researcher’s Position or Reflexivity	76
Rich, Thick Descriptions	77
Data Reporting and Areas of Considerations.....	77
Summary of Methodology	80
IV. FINDINGS.....	81
Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment	85
Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment	86
Helping Students in Crisis	86
Building Relationships with Students in Crisis	89
Mastery of Curriculum Implementation	91
Autonomy and Differentiation.....	91
Curriculum Beyond the General Classroom	94
District Support and Initiatives	96

Developing the Leadership to Lead	96
Walking Together	98
Dimension 1 Summary	99
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity.....	100
Organizational Structure for Leadership Support.....	100
Strategic Planning and Vision.....	102
Focus and Clarity	102
Leadership Presence and Connection	103
Creating Space for Support.....	104
Creating Space for Transparency.....	106
Dimension 2 Summary	107
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity.....	107
Filling the Bus: Creating the Right Culture	108
Creating a Staffing Process.....	108
Finding (and creating) the Experts.....	109
Accountability and Autonomy	110
Professional Development	111
Dimension 3 Summary	112
Dimension 5: Families and Community	113
Build Trust: Engagement, Communication, and Collaboration.....	113
Dimension 5 Summary	115
Summary of Dimensions.....	116
Grand Theme 1: Equity and Equitable Practices	116
Community Access	117
Capital Resources.....	118
Human Resources	119
Supporting Students with Special Needs	120
COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on PSM and the Equity Gap.....	121
Instructional and Curricular Practices.....	122
Professional Development	123
Grand Theme 2: Urgency.....	125
Academic Time.....	125
Creating a Pipeline of Teacher Leaders	126
Chapter Summary	127

V. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CLOSING THOUGHTS.....128

Conceptual Framework, Themes, and Findings	128
Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment	130
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity.....	133
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity.....	135

Dimension 5: Families and Community	137
Summary of Grand Themes	138
Research Questions and Findings	139
Expectation vs. Reality	146
Goal: Positive Impact on Student Living.....	146
Suggestions for Future Research	147
Recommendations for Stakeholders and Closing Thoughts	150
Reivement Gap	150
Policymakers.....	151
School District	152
Leaders in the Higher Education Community	154
Community Advocates.....	155
Closing Thoughts	156
REFERENCES	159
APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL	167
APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM	168
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	171
APPENDIX D. DIMENSION AND INDICATORS OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL MODEL REFORM PROGRAM	172

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Description of Comprehensive School Reform Strategies	10
Table 2. End of Year Assessment Student Proficiency Composite Scores (Grades 3-5)	13
Table 3. Staffing of K-5 Teachers at LES During Case Study	15
Table 4. Dimensions and Sub-Dimensions of PSM.....	16
Table 5. 12 Key Indicators by Dimension with Sub-Dimension in Parentheses	17
Table 6. Description of Comprehensive School Reform Strategies	40
Table 7. Participant Information	66
Table 8. Primary School Model Program Framework Categories and Themes	82
Table 9. Grand Theme Descriptions	84
Table 10. Themes Categorized by Dimensions	129
Table 11. Grand Themes and Descriptions.....	139
Table 12. Wraparound Solutions	148

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) Objectives and Accountability Measures.....	37
Figure 2. Race to the Top Objectives and Accountability Measures.....	37
Figure 3. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA) Objectives and Accountability Measures	38

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

School reform continues to be a major area of focus for education leaders on the local, state, and national levels. In 2009, Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education at that time, shared that approximately 5,000 of the nation’s schools were “chronically low performing” (Zimmer et al., 2017, p. 691). At that moment, the reform of school practice and the improvement of school performance became the focus in public education once again. Since then, the federal government has invested billions of dollars to fund school reform policies and programs to “turnaround” the performance of the identified low-performing schools struggling to meet federal, state, and school district policy and expectations.

During recent years, some states have implemented a popular reform strategy known as *school turnaround*. The dire situation of these schools required the improvement to be dramatic and quick, a key characteristic of a turnaround policy. The root of the urgency stems from data stating that most students in high poverty schools are not reading at grade level by fourth grade and that 85% of the students lack reading proficiency even after attending school for three years (Lee & Min, 2017). Cucchiara et al. (2015) maintain that these schools are strong candidates for this dramatic reform because they appear to be “immune to reform” (pp. 259–260). The perception of immunity comes from schools being unable to sustain improvement from year to year.

School reform aims to address areas beyond student academic performance, areas such as teacher and leader practice and development. States across the nation implemented various reform strategies, such as school personnel replacement (from leadership to teachers), revision of operational procedures (calendars, schedules, etc.), intense professional development plans for school leadership and teachers, and the purchase and implementation of curricular tools to improve schools.

The boldest form of federal school reform occurred in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) during the G.W. Bush Administration. This legislative bill required that states set proficiency goals for reading and math with ambitious annual rising targets. Two major differences with this bill were the focus on subgroups (racial and socioeconomic) within the total school population and the placing of penalties on schools that did not meet the targets set by the residing state (Jennings, 2015). The focus on subgroups also had implications on how states, districts, and schools helped all students, particularly disadvantaged students in impoverished areas. This required focus directly addresses the claim from Orfield and Jarvie (2020) that “public schools educate and help socialize nine of every ten American children. The reality is that the poorest and most excluded groups are concentrated in the weakest schools” (p. 9).

Race to the Top (RttT), the next federal approach to school reform, took place during the Obama Administration. While continuing to focus on student performance on standardized tests, states and districts were provided with funding in place of penalties. States could receive the funds with the use of organizational structures that connected test scores to teacher evaluation systems and increased support of charter schools and school

choice. The expectation was that the money was used to bring “broad, systemic improvement in schools” (Jennings, 2015, p. 77). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in 2015 under the Obama Administration, was the first reauthorization of ESEA since NCLB. With a continued focus on educating all students, this law “shifted a great deal education authority ... back to the states and local education agencies” (Sharp, 2016, p. 1).

Over the years, discourse has continued among school leaders and policy makers to determine which reform strategies are most effective. Programs from schools that have “figured it out” are often imitated and applied to other districts and schools, hoping to replicate the success. After achieving and working to replicate success, leaders are then tasked with sustaining the success- an insurmountable task at times. Reform success and actionable insights have been determined using the conventional quantitative data, such as student proficiency and growth and teacher performance and turnover. An area of opportunity for data collection with school reform centers on the implementation process and educators’ perceptions and experiences during the implementation. Through document analysis and key interviews, this study will highlight the importance of understanding educator experiences, perceptions, and needs during the implementation to ensure sustainability. While the program frameworks are important and necessary to ensure coherence among program participants, the morale and self-efficacy of the educators putting the plan into action are key to the overall success.

Problem Statement

Creating and implementing an effective school reform program is vital to the improvement of public schools that struggle to meet growth and proficiency expectations as outlined by the state and federal guidelines. After the announcement of Race to the Top Grant (RTTT), the federal government disseminated approximately 1,000 grants to chronically low-performing schools located in urban metropolitan and inner-city areas (Green, 2015; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). Schools in urban or metropolitan areas tend to serve students from poverty and minority backgrounds and must navigate issues beyond low student academic performance. Teacher performance, retention, and experience are factors that contribute to chronic low performance (Grissom, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2013; Thompson-Dorsey, 2013).

School leaders are tirelessly searching for that silver bullet that addresses low academic achievement, high student needs, and high teacher frustration and turnover. Schools going through a school reform process are more than likely serving students who are performing at least one to two years below grade level in multiple subjects. The expectation is that the same teachers and students finish the year as close to grade-level proficiency as possible. Such a change does not occur by chance; leaders believe that it takes effective strategic planning, conversation, and implementation of intense improvement strategies.

When analyzing various school reform policies, one will look for strategies that focus on ensuring and inspecting for high-quality instruction, effective curricular tools, teacher recruitment and retention, and teacher and leader development. A recurring

criticism of school reform is the pressure and sometimes unrealistic expectations and intense demands placed on teachers throughout the school reform (Cucchiara et al., 2015). Climate and culture among the staff in the building are factors in school success that are sometimes overlooked but can have a detrimental impact on the vision and mission of the school. The purpose of this study is rooted in the idea that the quality of working conditions, teacher morale, and perception of teacher support are found to be key factors in teacher turnover. Low-performing schools struggle with keeping teachers and both during and after the school year, which has shown to have a direct impact on the immediate and long-term success of student learning (Cucchiara et al., 2015; Redding & Henry, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) is in the Southeastern School District (SPD). SPD is the fifth largest district in the host state and is also home to a military base. LES entered the fourth year of implementation of the Primary School Model Program (PSM) in the 2020-2021 school year.¹ The primary purpose of this study was to capture and document the perspectives and experiences of the staff at Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) during the implementation of the PSM School Reform Program, as understanding educators' experiences during the reform process is a major gap in school reform research (Cucchiara et al., 2015). After collecting, completing, and analyzing data through document analysis and interviews, I identified common trends in

¹ All names of schools, districts and participants are pseudonyms.

the responses amplifying the voice and experiences of the educators working to put the school reform policy in action. It is my goal that my research of LES and the Southeastern School District will impact the literature of school reform while simultaneously having a positive impact on the educational experience of students and educators in LES and the Southeastern School District in the future. The following research questions will guide my study:

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of educators at Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program (PSM)?
 - a. What lessons have staff and district leaders learned from their experience of implementing the Primary Support Model Program?
 - b. What do educators perceive to be best practices for school improvement during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program?

Background Context

History of School Reform

The history of school reform is rooted in the level of federal government control. Decades before the signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), there was consistent conversation centered on how much support should the federal government give the states and how much control comes with that support. Through ESEA, America saw an impact on the daily operation of schools through increases in funding, aid, and educational research. At the center of this legislation, teachers and administrators were expected to better serve economically and educationally

disadvantaged students (Jennings, 2015). This broad implementation of federal regulations on public education went through many changes throughout the years and has been a prominent political issue. Between 1940-1960, Congress debated how to improve literacy and schooling for students but could not come to a compromise. It was not until the United States was outdone on the scientific world stage that conversation for change began to take place.

Through discussion of the history of school reform, there are key aspects that we will see resurface during the data collection and analysis of this case study. Teacher salary, segregation, integration, and school choice were all issues on the table during the late 1950s. Southern congressional representation feared that federal aid would result in integration, although *Brown v. Board* had already been decided. Those who support private schools wanted the option to be considered for federal aid, like public schools. Finally, the fear that federal control would impact the local operational procedures such as hiring and choice of curriculum was a large obstacle that Congress could not overcome.

Federal school reform continued its roller coaster ride with the administration of Ronald Reagan's releasing *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. This report stated that American students were receiving a mediocre education. There was a fear that students would not be able to compete with students around the world. America would no longer be a global force (Jennings, 2015). The report made the claim that the federal government was not effective in overseeing education. Consequently, the focus on how to improve education shifted to the accountability movement.

Every 4 years, ESEA goes through a review and renewal process, where government officials analyze school success and create programs to address the identified needs. The 2001 review and renewal of the ESEA is an important milestone, introducing The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed under the administration of George W. Bush. Ladd (2017) and Nyumba et al. (2018) identify three primary areas of focus in this legislation:

- **Student Performance:** All students will be tested annually starting in Grade 3, with 100% of students meeting state proficiency goals by the 2013-2014 school year. States create their own tests and set their own standards
- **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** Every school should show adequate yearly progress towards the 2013-2014 goal. Progress is shown overall and through various subgroups (racial, socioeconomic, disability, and others)
- **Highly Qualified Teachers:** All teachers of core academic subject areas should hold a bachelor's degree and subject-specific knowledge.

NCLB placed a magnifying glass on student performance beyond whole group within the school. Schools were accountable for the performance of poor students, minority students, and students with disabilities, giving a true picture of school successes and failures. The level of emphasis on testing and accountability required states to use funding to support the implementation of school-wide educational programs.

In 2008, ESEA reached another pivotal year of review and renewal under the Obama Administration. After Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made the strong claim mentioned in the opening of this chapter, the Department of Education implemented the

Race to the Top Federal Grant Program (RttT). States and schools had the opportunity to participate in this competitive grant program and receive a significant amount of funding if various requirements were fulfilled and schools achieve high performance scores. The U.S. Department of Education (2009) identifies four core education reform areas for the turnaround of low performing schools across the nation (a) adopting standards and assessments to prepare students for college and workforce; (b) building data systems to inform teachers and principals on instructional improvement; (c) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals where they are needed most; (d) turning around the lowest-performing schools.

In 2015, under the School Improvement Grants (SIG), the U.S. Department of Education approved a Whole School Reform Model (WSRM) to improve the state of our schools. In WSRM, districts are required to select from an approved list of research-based programs that show evidence of effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In this reform model, the district selected from a list of approved programs and worked with individuals or organizations who serve as consultants for the school or district through this process. The program provided clear guidelines and areas of focus, such as community engagement, professional development, curriculum, instruction, college/career readiness, and other best practices of effective schooling. The host state of SPD selected the Primary School Model Program as the research-based program to improve the low-performing schools across the state, including LES (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020). The remaining sections of this chapter will provide

demographic and academic data of SPD and LES, along with the Dimensions of Focus for LES.

States that received funds were required to implement various strategies and programs that align with the federal school reform areas listed above. Table 1 identifies the various types of school reform that states and districts continue to use today to effect drastic and positive change. Comprehensive School Reform programs aim to improve schools through “instructional changes and increasing training for school professionals” (Lee & Min, 2017, p. 372). Knowing and understanding the general aspects of school reform will be useful throughout this case study analysis.

Table 1.

Description of Comprehensive School Reform Strategies

Reform Strategy	Reform Description
Turnaround Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Replace principal ● Replace at least 50% of staff ● Implement a new instructional program
Restart Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close the school and restart as a charter school
School Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close the school, redistribute students to other more <i>highly achieving</i> schools
Transformational Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Replace the principal ● Implement Comprehensive Reforms

Note. Source: Peck and Reitzug (2014), p. 10.

Southeastern Public-School District

With approximately 51,000 students in 87 schools, SPD is one of the largest districts in its state. Sixty percent of the district schools serve elementary-age students in rural, suburban, and urban communities. SPD has an interesting demographic profile and history, with over 25% of their families considered active military employees due to the geographic proximity of a large U.S. Army Base. Rounding out the demographic profile of SPD, almost 79% of the students served in SPD receive free or reduced lunch, with 72% of the population being minority. With this data, it was not uncommon to see the implications of homogeneous socio-economic and ethnic student populations across multiple schools in SPD, directly aligning with research that identifies a strong connection between socio-economic status and race and the tendency to have a negative impact on student performance (Diem, 2012). As of the 2018-2019 school year, 26% of the schools in SPD were identified as *low performing* by the governing state.

Disaggregating school demographic data, many of the schools in SPD not only reflected school composition reminiscent of the time pre-*Brown v. Board* but were also struggling to meet the statewide and federal expectations regarding student performance. Multiple researchers argue that student growth, academically and socially, was directly impacted by resegregation. Thompson-Dorsey (2013) states that students who are both poor and low performing not only benefit academically from working alongside high performing and affluent students but also argues that all students reap the benefits of learning how to work with others that have varying experiences. Like other districts around the state and nation, SPD began creating and implementing school reform

programs to address two primary symptoms of high needs schools: low student performance and high teacher turnover rate.

Having worked in segregated schools on either side of the continuum, I have been an active participant (teacher and administrator) in a variety of school reform programs put in place by the state and district. I can vividly remember the conversations we had among teachers and colleagues about the process and our roles and expectations. Each school executed a school reform program as determined by the district; however, there was little dialogue regarding the effectiveness of the program before, during, and after the implementation, especially with teachers. In many instances, the success of the program and the school faculty was solely measured by student performance data on the annual end-of-year standardized assessment. This became a major point of frustration, specifically when it was determined that the reform program would be discontinued to make way for another, or school faculty and administration were faced with affirmations or refutations based on their student data.

The Primary School Model Reform Program was selected by the state to be used by all school districts to help guide districts and schools in managing a reflective and focused improvement process. With a focus on tracking for success, schools and districts are held to a higher level of transparency and accountability within their improvement teams and for the broader school community, along with autonomy and flexibility. As a web-based tool, each school's progress towards the goals is discussed and updated in real-time for all stakeholders to view, creating stronger partnerships between community and school and encourage feedback from district leadership, ensuring a high level of

collaboration. PSM uses over 100 research-based effective practices (indicators) and allows schools flexibility to personalize their plans to meet their distinct needs, an aspect that is not always apparent in school reform. With the emphasis on the 12 Key Indicators, practices that are key levers in school success, PSM provided a reform program that supported consistency across the district for schools that are low performing with unique needs, such as Lincoln Elementary School.

Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School

Demographic and Academic Data

Lincoln Elementary School is in an attendance zone with varied socio-economic statuses, ranging from a few wealthy to below the poverty line. In the 2018-2019 school year, only 10% of the incoming kindergarten students were considered proficient upon enrollment. Of the 391 students enrolled in LES, 85% are minority, and 73% are considered economically disadvantaged. Table 2 provides a snapshot of student performance during the previous 5 years when LES received the designation of a low-performing school.

Table 2.

End of Year Assessment Student Proficiency Composite Scores (Grades 3-5)

School Year	Reading	Math	Science	Growth Measure	School Letter Grade
2014-2015	30.3%	30.9%	33.3%	Met	D
2015-2016	28.0%	25.8%	58.9%	Met	D
2016-2017	22.2%	32.3%	29.0%	Met	D

School Year	Reading	Math	Science	Growth Measure	School Letter Grade
2017-2018	25.5%	32.5%	46.0%	Met	D
2018-2019	39.6%	43.3%	66.7%	Met	D
2019-2020	No assessment data due to COVID-19 School Closure			Met	D

Note. Source: State Accountability Website, 2020.

Table 2 shows the difficulty LES has encountered in helping students meet proficiency on the state end-of-year assessments from year to year. The growth has been inconsistent and unsustainable in some cases, ranging from 22% to 66% among the three content areas. Student performance was the primary piece of data used to identify and categorize LES as low performing, allowing for state and federal support. Teacher recruitment, retention, and development were secondary pieces of data used to connect with the main areas of focus within the PSM Program: Instructional Excellence and Alignment, Leadership Capacity, Professional Capacity, and Families and Community.

Personnel Data

Personnel recruitment, retention, and development is a key area in school reform. Over the years, LES has faced some of the traditional characteristics of a Title I, low-performing school: high teacher/administration turnover, teacher certification, and teacher development. Table 3 outlines the staffing for 2019-2020 through the 2020-2021 school years; LES saw the following changes in staffing.

Table 3.

Staffing of K-5 Teachers at LES During Case Study

School Year	Beginning Teachers (Licensed)	Lateral Entry/ Residency Candidates	Veteran Teachers
2019-2020	7	8	13
2020-2021	6	7	14

Note. Source: Interview with Principal

The participants of this study reflect the various levels of experience in the school building, ranging from administrative license, graduate degrees, multiple licensures, beginning teachers, and residency candidates who are working on completing their certification.

Based on the state legislative bill, if a school receives a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of “met expected growth” or “not met expected growth,” it is considered a low-performing school. Schools can also be labeled as recurring low-performing schools if identified as low-performing in any two of the last three years. Looking at the data in Table 2, LES is considered a recurring low-performing school and is therefore required by SPD and the state to implement the PSM Program using the 12 Key Indicators as the guide for improvement.

Structure of Primary School Model Reform Program

The Primary School Model Program uses a framework with the support of the Academic Development Institute, a company that focuses on helping schools and districts improve through a platform known as Indistar[®]. As mentioned previously, PSM identifies

over 100 research-based effective practices (indicators) to help each school create a continuous improvement plan that meets individual school needs. After careful document analysis, four categorical tiers were identified within the structure: Dimensions, Sub-Dimensions, Indicators, and Key Indicators.

In the two top tiers of PSM are dimensions and sub-dimensions. The dimensions identify the key aspects of school reform: Instructional Excellence and Alignment, Leadership Capacity, Professional Capacity, Planning and Operational Effectiveness, and Families and Community. The sub-dimensions within each dimension help to categorize the dimensions even further, identifying areas of focus, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4.

Dimensions and Sub-Dimensions of PSM

Dimensions	Sub-Dimensions
Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment	1.1: High expectations for all staff and students 1.2: Curriculum and instructional alignment 1.3: Data analysis and instructional planning 1.4: Student support services
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity	2.1: Strategic planning, mission, and vision 2.2 Distributed leadership and collaboration 2.3: Monitoring instruction in school
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity	3.1: Teacher quality and experience 3.2 Quality of professional development 3.3 Talent recruitment and retention
Dimension 4: Planning and Operational Effectiveness	4.1 Resource Allocation 4.2 Facilities and Technology
Dimension 5: Families and Community	5.1 Family Engagement 5.2 Community Engagement

The third and fourth tiers consist of the 100 indicators that are meant to guide the reform process and stakeholder actions. As a low-performing school, LES is required to use a specified set of strategies that the state has identified as a research-based effective practice for school improvement, referred to as 12 Key Indicators (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2020). One could consider the 12 Key Indicators as the ‘silver bullets’ used to address the systematic issues of each low-performing school, in this case, LES. NCDPI (2020) identified the use of PSM and the 12 Key Indicators to help districts with multiple low-performing schools, such as SPD, to consolidate plans and help with organization and management. It is important to note that in Table 5, only four of the five dimensions include the 12 Key Indicators, and therefore are the primary dimensions discussed throughout the case study.

Table 5.

12 Key Indicators by Dimension with Sub-Dimension in Parentheses

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence
Key Indicator 1: All teachers employ effective classroom management and reinforce classroom rules and procedures by positively teaching (1.1)
Key Indicator 2: Instructional Teams develop standards-aligned units of instruction for each subject and grade level. (1.2)
Key Indicator 3: The school implements a tiered instructional system that allows teachers to deliver evidence-based instruction aligned with the individual needs of students across all tiers. (1.4)
Key Indicator 4: ALL teachers are attentive to students' emotional states, guide students in managing their emotions, and arrange for supports and interventions when necessary. (1.4)

Dimension 1: Leadership Capacity (Cont.)
Key Indicator 5: The school develops and implements consistent, intentional, and ongoing plans to support student transitions for grade-to-grade and level-to-level. (1.4)
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity
Key Indicator 6: The district has a district support and Improvement Team (2.1)
Key Indicator 7: A Leadership Team consisting of the principal, teachers who lead the Instructional Teams, and other professional staff meets regularly (at least twice a month) to review the implementation of effective practices (2.1)
Key Indicator 8: The school has established a team structure among teachers with specific duties and time for instructional planning (2.2)
Key Indicator 9: The principal monitors curriculum and classroom instruction regularly and provides timely, clear, constructive feedback to teachers. (2.3)
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity
Key Indicator 10: The District/School regularly looks at school performance data and aggregated classroom observation data and uses that data to make decisions about school improvement and professional development needs.
Key Indicator 11: The District/School has established a system of procedures and protocols for recruiting, evaluating, rewarding, and replacing staff.
Dimension 5: Families and Community
Key Indicator 12: The school regularly communicates with parents/guardians about its expectations of them and the importance of the curriculum of the home (what parents can do at home to support their children’s learning).

Note. Source: PSM Framework Document

The structure of the Primary School Model Program is specific and intentional, providing guidance for school leaders, school staff, and community stakeholders. Transparency is a key aspect of this school reform process. The school reform plan is available for viewing with real-time updates showing analysis, reflection, and readjustments to goals. The concise language of the dimensions and indicators allows for both experienced and inexperienced stakeholders to understand the process and progress.

The clarity of the structure was also important in the decision to use the PSM Program as a conceptual framework with this study, categorizing the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Significance of Study

School reform and school improvement are major conversation topics among educational leaders and advocates. Based on my experience, most supporters of education want effective public schooling to take place daily for our students. School reform is an educational concept that is created and implemented through the “trickledown effect.” The expectations, guidelines, and measures are communicated from the top and work down to the classroom level. While the major decision-makers work hard to ensure the right plans are put in place, the school and district leaders, along with classroom teachers, are tasked with working the plan.

In my professional experience, I have worked in low performing, high needs, high minority, and low socio-economic schools, and I have also worked in high performing, low minority, and high socio-economic schools. I remember such a stark difference in accountability, expectations, and urgency. Working in a school going through reform or turnaround, there were few opportunities to share our experiences as educators in the building. There was not always a safe and open space to discuss perceptions and feelings as the focus is mostly on the work that needs to get done. Educator perception and experience is a growing area of research regarding school reform and school improvement.

As we continue to collect, analyze, and share data from educators implementing school reform, the education community can continue to implement effective reform strategies that impact student performance, student and staff social and emotional well-being, teacher recruitment, retention, and development. Lee and Min (2017) stress that comprehensive school reform programs (CSR) use a variety of strategies to provide a high-quality experience to students and therefore require a focus on professional development and assistance during implementation. This study can help provide information to policymakers who continue to create school reform programs to improve student achievement and other aspects of schooling. I do believe that amplification of the educators' voices and implementing feedback gleaned from their conversations shows a level of value for teachers, which has an impact on employee engagement, morale, and effectiveness.

When school reform is successful, it is normal for schools and districts to either duplicate the program or transfer aspects of the policy to fit their district or school needs. Helping to identify successes and areas of growth in the program and program implementation will not only help SPD but will also impact education in the long term, providing the information needed to make informed decisions regarding school improvement.

Brief Methods Description

During this study, data collection occurred through interviews and document analysis. Because this is a single case study, I interviewed employees who serve in various positions within Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) to identify the

varied perceptions and experiences of the PSM Program. The first phase of interviews started with the administrative team, consisting of the Principal and one Assistant Principal, and the Instructional Coach. In the second phase, I sent an email request for participation, starting with 2-3 members from each department of the school. I solicited participation from grade levels, student support, and special education. In the request and at the end of the interview, each participant confirmed their willingness to speak with me again or answer any questions that may occur through analysis or other interviews. Based on the rich discussion, I found myself communicating with five of the nine participants again through email, shared documents of their transcript, or phone calls.

The document analysis aspect of this research study helped me in forming my guiding questions and protocols for the various interviews and focus group. I collected data from various documents regarding SPD, LES and PSM, with the intent to collect and analyze information on the history and implementation of the PSM program and provide insight into the community or district perceptions of the PSM.

Summary and Overview

My interest in this topic stems from personal and professional experience serving in diverse school settings where I had the opportunity to implement school reform programs mandated by the state and by the district in my roles as a teacher and as an administrator. In Chapter I, I identified the problem area and the purpose of this study. As stated throughout that chapter, the purpose of the study was to identify educator perceptions and experiences during the implementation of a district-mandated school reform program. In Chapter I, I also provided detailed background information regarding

Lincoln Elementary School, the Southeastern Public School District, and the Primary School Model Program to help the reader gain a better understanding of the setting as s/he reads the remainder of the dissertation. Most importantly, this chapter identified the significance of this study: amplifying the voice of those implementing an intense school reform program to celebrate and/or improve aspects of the PSM program. Since school reform is such a major part of educational research, conducting effective studies on reform models implemented in various districts is an opportunity to impact future school reform programs.

Chapter II takes a more in-depth look at the literature regarding school reform and educator perception in specific areas: resegregation in the 20th century, the impact of school composition in resegregated schools, history, and impact of school reform on resegregated schools, and the impact of school reform on school-level educators. Ultimately, Chapter II provides insight into the importance of school composition and its impact on school success while highlighting the research gap of educator perceptions and experience during school reform, the purpose of this case study.

Gathering educator perceptions and experiences will take place through interviews, observations, focus groups, and document collection. Chapter III provides a detailed description of the methodology and data collection methods that will take place in the study. The participants, setting, and evidence of validity will also be shared and discussed in this chapter giving the reader a clear view of the “who” and the “how” of this case study.

Chapter IV provides the reader with my findings and analysis of the data collected in the interviews, focus group interview, and document collection. Through the document collection and analysis, the reader will learn about the criteria guidelines used to designate LES and other schools in the state as *low performing*. With rich descriptions, detailed accounts of the teacher perceptions are described and centered on the Primary School Model framework, citing themes from the data. Finally, Chapter V analyzes and synthesizes the themes from Chapter IV, providing a collective account of thoughts and experiences that can be shared with school and district leadership to support successful schooling.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1954, the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* created a major shift in public education when the United States Supreme Court decided that separate environments for student learning based on race were inherently unequal. Although benefits of integration have been identified by various studies and researchers, it seems that public education has shifted back to the segregated ways pre-*Brown*. Holme and Finnigan (2013) state, “the average Black and Latino students attend school with more than 75% non-white, and nearly half of these students attend schools with poverty rates over 80%” (p. 16). Additional data show that Black and Latino students experience a more segregated educational experience today in the 21st century than in the late 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement, while “a White student is educated in a school nearly three-fourths White, 1/8 Latino and 1/12 Black” (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014, p. 725; see also Thompson-Dorsey, 2013). Although our nation has become more diverse, data show that our schools are not and that our students attend “apartheid schools” as labeled by Siegel-Hawley (as cited in Thompson-Dorsey, 2013, p. 534). Over the recent years, educators, politicians, and researchers provide multiple reasons for the resurgence of segregation in public schools: white flight, neighborhood (residential) segregation, charter schools and school choice programs, and policy implementation.

In the early 1960s, public education advocates, educators, and politicians stressed the need for improving the system to ensure students were equally educated and able to compete globally with students in other countries. As a result of these findings, federal, state, and local policy makers worked to understand the issues, starting with The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, marking the beginning of “broad federal involvement” and school reform (Jennings, 2015, p. 1). ESEA earmarked financial aid to provide materials, resources, and support for low-income or special needs students with the goal of enhancing their access to public and/or private education. The purpose of the ESEA was to provide schools with large numbers of low-income families with opportunities “to expand and improve their educational programs by various means which contribute particularly to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children” (Jennings, 2015, p. 30).

Although the *Brown v. Board* ruling came down in 1954, serving as a catalyst for the civil rights movement, the fierce resistance by state and local officials delayed true desegregation. This was in part due to the weak laws and policies that did not require legitimate action from state and district leaders (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020; Honey & Smrekar, 2020). The most active pursuit of school desegregation did not take place until the middle of the civil rights era in the mid-1960s. With the help of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and various U.S. Supreme Court Decisions such as *Green v. Kent County* (1968) and *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (1971), civil rights advocates gained the power and leverage needed to demand integrated schools across the nation (Honey & Smrekar, 2020). As a result, “public schools were substantially less segregated than the residential

neighborhoods” (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 8). The height of desegregation occurred in the late 1980s but was short-lived after court rulings such as *Oklahoma v Dowell* (1991) and *Missouri v Jenkins* (1995). These court rulings stopped or reversed the desegregation efforts.

If we put faces to the data, there is clear evidence of school enrollment changes due to the increased diversity and the resurgence of segregation during the 1990s and 21st century. The public-school enrollment is increasingly more diverse with an increase of Latino, Asian and multiracial students, ethnic groups that rarely existed in 1954, if at all (Frankenberg et al., 2019). The segregation of black students continued to intensify across the nation over the last 30 years, with 40% of Black students attending schools with 90% or more of students of color. At the same time, White and Latino students have been found to attend schools with 69% and 55% of their same race peers, respectively, highlighting the decrease in racial diversity (Frankenberg et al., 2019).

The changes in school population have repercussions for school reform planning and implementation. With the change in the cultural and ethnic make-up of the schools in need, leaders and policy makers are required to change their approach to school reform, starting with seeking to understand the pressures and perceptions of the teachers and school leaders executing the day-to-day tasks of schooling. Throughout my review of the literature, four themes or topics have shown to be important in understanding school reform and teacher perception (a) the reality of low-performing schools; (b) objectives and characteristics of school reform and how they align with the reality of low performing schools; (c) specific school reform models, highlighting the purpose of the

models and why they are chosen by certain types of schools; (d) discussion of teacher and educator perception during school reform of low performing schools in the literature.

Each topic, whether analyzed separately or together, is important in identifying the gaps in the literature, serving as a foundation for data collection in this case study.

The Reality of Low-Performing Schools

Learning, working, and leading in a low-performing school comes with its own reality, requiring a unique set of skills and unique solutions. Policy makers have created labels such as ‘failing’ or ‘high needs’ to help categorize and compare schools. In this section, I will describe the reality of such schools, identifying the characteristics and causes of low-performing schools to provide context and clarity around LES and the experience of the educators.

School Geography and Resegregation

In recent years, researchers completed studies on student assignment policies, specifically court-ordered desegregation in multiple states and districts, finding that districts are working to create student assignment plans that are beneficial for all students. A major point of research found a strong connection between socio-economic status (SES) and race, with strong implications for racial diversity in schools (Diem, 2012). In the last decade, various districts have moved from using student assignment policies that were based on the SES of students to the demographics of students, referred to as zone-based policies. Recent data shows,

Black suburbanization and Latino migration have produced more Black contact with Latinos in very high poverty schools and fewer of the virtually all-Black

schools of the old communities ... now Black children are isolated from White and middle-class students but are a minority in the school of another minority. (Frankenberg et al., 2019, p. 8)

Conventional reasons such as White flight, affordable housing, and change in student assignment policies are still key reasons for the resurgence of segregation in public schools; however, starting in the late 1990s, school choice policies began to shift to the concept of charter schools. Recent research has shown that over the years, charter schools have been identified as a contributor to the resegregation of traditional public schools and tend to be more segregated than those districts (Ayscue, Nelson, et al., 2018). Studies on segregation in traditional public schools and the connection to school choice find that although the purpose of charter schools was to provide better educational opportunities for marginalized groups of children, the suburban location of the schools attracts academically proficient White or Asian students, creating those high poverty and minority schools in home districts (Ayscue, Nelson, et al., 2018).

With zone-based policies, the geographic location and student enrollment of the school are directly related to student residence. Research shows that assigning students to schools closer to their homes results in increased segregation and lower test scores for minority students (Gamoran & An, 2016). When students are in a homogeneous school, their educational and cultural experience is limited to one perspective. Researchers have found that all students benefit from learning in a racially diverse environment, showing no negative effects on their learning, and preparing all groups better for living and working in a society with no true racial majority (Mickelson,

Bottia, & Lambert, 2013; Ayscue, Siegel-Hawley, et al., 2018; Frankenberg et al., 2019). Although various studies show that students experience a positive impact on their learning when they are educated in diverse settings, many states and districts, including the Southeastern Public School District, have dismantled desegregation policies in favor of neighborhood zone policies and shorter commutes (Gamoran & An, 2016). In recent years, gentrification has become a possible solution to revive urban school districts, with the hope that these new communities can create schools that are challenging academically while ensuring diversity and equity for all stakeholders (Frankenberg et al., 2019).

Ensuring and maintaining school integration during the last two decades has proven to be a difficult task for policy makers on all levels. The general population has become more diverse as the “relationship between segregation, desegregation and integration grows more complex” (Diem & Brooks, 2013, p. 2). Student populations are no longer two-dimensional with Black and White students. School leaders must also consider students from various ethnic backgrounds, Asian, Latinx, Native American, and others. Black and Latino students are “more segregated in the 21st century than they were during the 1960s and Civil Rights Movement” (Thompson-Dorsey, 2013, p. 534). The causality of resegregation and low student achievement has become a major topic of discourse in schooling and school reform.

In recent years, researchers have discussed the decline of integration in public schooling, making a strong connection to the increase of low-performing schools. According to Childs and Russell (2017), the number of schools identified as low-

performing has increased to 15,000, with approximately 68% of these schools located in Urban areas, serving students of color. Schools that are 81-100% Black and Latino serve a student body in which 70% of the students live in poverty. Even more staggering is the fact that schools with the highest concentration of Black and Latino students (91-100%) have a low-income percentage of 90%. On the other end of the spectrum, only 4% of schools that are overwhelmingly White and Asian serve a student population where at least 80% are impoverished, underscoring the isolation of students in public education (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Non-White and poor students have little to no interaction with White students from various socio-economic backgrounds, specifically the affluent. White, affluent students have very little interaction with poor and minority students. The literature suggests that creating integrated schools not only impacts the educational experience of students while in school but recognizes the future impact on the residential choices of students when they graduate and become young adults—thus decreasing the number of segregated neighborhoods and schools in the future (Frankenberg, 2013).

Further research has found that desegregated schools support:

reduction in prejudice and stereotypes alongside increased friendships across groups, and in some circumstances, higher levels of civic engagement, greater likelihood of living and working in diverse environments later in life, as well as increased educational and occupational attainment, more prestigious jobs with greater economic returns, health benefits, and reduction in adult poverty and incarceration. (Ayscue, Nelson, et al., 2018, p. 7)

With strong evidence to suggest that school geography and resegregation play a large role in the surge of low-performing schools, it is important that policymakers

acknowledge that integration is not just for the benefit of poor, minority, and under-exposed children, but for their other peers as well. When students learn to interact and engage with students that are not like them, they begin to acquire empathy, encouraging a strong cultural and academic education. The academic performance of students in a low-performing school is a key to school reform. How do the racial makeup and geography of a school and its students impact the teaching and learning that takes place each day?

Quality Assurance: Learning, Teaching, and Leading

Each day that students enter a school building, there is an expectation of high-quality instruction and positive student performance. The federal government and educational leaders use student achievement data as a primary determining factor to identify low-performing schools. Are all students receiving rigorous instruction through a well-rounded curriculum that integrates various subjects in the core curriculum? Are students prepared to study in a higher education institution without the need for remediation? Are teachers performing to their highest potential, and are leaders providing the highest level of leadership? Based on research, students, teachers, and school administrators in low-performing schools fail to meet those expectations and according to the federal government, doing so consecutively for two years yields the label of ‘low performing’ (Childs & Russell, 2017; Cosner & Jones, 2016).

Reardon’s research finds that racial segregation is strongly associated with racial achievement gaps (Reardon, 2016). Low-performing segregated schools primarily serve minority and poor students in a concentrated environment. Students who are raised in poverty are less likely to experience pre-kindergarten or be exposed to a large vocabulary

like their affluent peers, which has a direct impact on their academic performance early in their educational career (Ravitch, 2013). Ravitch (2013) goes on to explain that poverty affects every aspect of students: emotional health, well-being, motivation, school attendance, and mobility, creating an uneven playing field between impoverished and affluent students. High student achievement occurs with a rigorous curriculum, high-quality instruction, and highly effective teachers, with little to no teacher turnover each year. The delayed educational exposure, lack of teacher quality and experience, large class sizes, and lack of rigorous curriculum, districts find it difficult to sustain the success attained during reform. In recent years, school reform has focused on the development of teachers through instructional coaching, boasting a strong connection to improved student outcomes. An effective instructional coaching plan can positively impact new teacher induction, ongoing teacher development, implementation of new initiatives, and help teachers understand and adapt their instruction to new state content standards (Desimone & Pak, 2017). Again, this highlights the importance of a strong, intentional, and transparent connection with the educators is important to the success of school reform

Teacher Turnover

The recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers are vital to the success of high-needs schools and school reform. Simon and Johnson (2013) showed that high poverty, low-performing schools would lose 50% of their staff every 5 years and 20% each year. More recent data show that 4.6% of teacher turnover during the year and 25% at the end of the year, especially in high poverty, minority schools. As schools replace teachers, whether ineffective or highly effective, it is likely that a novice teacher with

little experience is assigned or selected to work in a challenging environment with low-performing students, a group that needs the most quality teacher (Redding & Henry, 2018). Three years is the defining moment for many students, especially poor minority children. When a student has three years of effective teaching, s/he tends to perform almost two grade levels ahead. On the other hand, if a child receives three years of poor teaching, s/he will more than likely “be so far behind they might never catch up” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 101). Unfortunately, with teacher turnover increasing significantly in the last three decades, high teacher turnover and lack of experienced teachers are a harsh reality that school leaders of high-needs schools must regularly navigate (Simon & Johnson, 2013). The connection between teacher performance and the achievement of their students shows a clear alignment to the lack of sustainability of school reform success in low-performing schools.

When seeking to understand and analyze the teacher turnover rate, one must recognize the various reasons that a teacher may leave a school. In low-performing schools, turnover is attributed to the difficulties of teaching low-achieving students, the burdens of high-stakes accountability, and ineffective leadership (Grissom, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2013). Researchers have found it interesting that most of the reasons for turnover do not relate to the students, but the school culture and environment, influence with school decisions, trust in leadership, professional development, instructional resources, and more importantly, their perception of their principal are the primary reasons found in exit survey data. Redding and Henry (2018) have also acknowledged the need to further analyze teacher turnover in school reform using two categories: within-

year and end-of-year. Data have shown that the timing of teacher turnover impacts school reform success and student output differently and can inform teacher development strategies and retention strategies. Simon and Johnson (2013) argue that teachers decide to teach in high poverty schools for the “humanistic commitment,” an intrinsic motivator; however, they choose to leave because the ability to teach is impeded by policies and expectations created by the district and school leaders, a more extrinsic notion.

The reality of low-performing schools creates a multitude of implications for state, district, and school leaders working to create and guide school reform. The realities explicitly described in this section are primary characteristics of low-performing schools, based on the literature. It is important to recognize that each school still has unique needs that are addressed through individualized dialogue by those doing the work in the building. The start of the 21st century saw an increase in reform programs and policies aimed at quick and drastic improvement. Since 2000, educators saw reform that centered on instructional practice, leadership capacity, literacy, and standardized assessments. Over time, policy makers created various ways that schools could improve in those areas, with constant changes to how to hold states, districts, and schools accountable.

School Reform

After the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a spotlight was not only on the issues of public education but the strategies for improvement. Released under the administration of Ronald Reagan, this scathing and dramatic report outlined the failures of public education. The theme of the report centered on the lack of improvement in the education of poor students because of poor schooling and ineffective aid from the federal

government. Corporate America argued that American students were not adequately prepared for higher-level jobs, and politicians were concerned that the United States was falling in rank on the international stage. The bipartisan solution led to the high-stakes accountability movement that we see today (Jennings, 2015). The literature highlights a variety of school reform initiatives and types of school reform models, but the goals and objectives are always the same—to improve teaching and learning for all students, increasing graduation rates, and decreasing dropout rates for high school students, and addressing teacher performance and turnover (James et al., 2016; Peck & Reitzug, 2014).

Federal Reform Programs

Over the years, the education system saw major overhauls of ESEA under the Clinton, GW Bush, and Obama administrations. In 1994, Bill Clinton implemented the Goals 2000 Policy: Educate America Act (EAA), which allowed states to set individualized academic standards, thus increasing state autonomy. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) shifted the climate of education by requiring a higher level of accountability through standardized tests and student performance in various subgroups. Schools were held accountable through strict performance expectations and incentives or sanctions depending on their performance. In the last 10 years, under Barack Obama, the federal government signed two major education reform initiatives into law, Race to the Top (RttT) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), to improve student achievement through standardized testing, teacher accountability through student data, and school improvement through competitive school choice. The guidelines and expectations in these initiatives are reflected in this case study of LES and SSD.

In 2009, the Obama Administration introduced a School Improvement Grant (SIG) Program to turn around chronically low performing schools, improving student achievement through RttT. The first school reform program under the SIG continued to use standardized testing to measure student achievement, adding the implementation of using standardized tests in teacher evaluations (Jennings, 2015). As of 2015, 47 out of the 50 states have implemented some type of school reform to support their school systems and find solutions with the support of over 5 billion dollars from the federal government (Ruble, 2015). In 2015, towards the end of his presidency, Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), returning autonomy to states. While states now have the power to determine the standards and learning outcomes, the progress will still be quantified through standardized testing (James et al., 2016). Figures 1-3 outline the general aspects for the last 15 years of school reform through No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA).

Figure 1.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) Objectives and Accountability Measures

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002)	
<p>General Guidelines/Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure schools have 100% of students are proficient by 2013-14 by setting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Goals ● Sanctions for schools unable to meet AYP goals consecutively ● Ensure proficiency for subgroups (economic, racial disabilities) ● Requires all teachers of core academic subjects are Highly Qualified (Bachelor’s degree and subject-specific knowledge) 	
K-8 Accountability	9-12 Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual testing in reading and math for grades 3-8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing once in reading and math for grades 9-12

Note. Data compiled from Ladd (2017)

Figure 2.

Race to the Top Objectives and Accountability Measures

Race to the Top (2009)	
<p>Incentive School Improvement Grant Program that rewards states for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating assessments that prepare students for success in college, workplace, and global stage ● Building data systems that measure student growth and success to inform decision making ● Recruiting, retaining, developing, and rewarding effective teachers and administrators ● Turning around the lowest-performing schools 	
K-8 Accountability	9-12 Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual testing in reading and math for grades 3-8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing once in reading and math for grades 9-12

Note. Data were taken from the U.S. Department of Education

(<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>)

Figure 3.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA) Objectives and Accountability Measures

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA, 2015)	
<p>General Guidelines/Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ensures that each state has set high college and career standards ● enables states to maintain accountability by directing resources towards schools that require improvement ● empowers states and local education agencies to use appropriate, evidenced-based interventions that foster school improvement ● encourages states to preserve annual assessments as an informing mechanism that does not overshadow teaching and learning ● increases access to quality preschool programs for more children ● secures new resources to identify and investigate promising educational practices and to replicate proven strategies that enhance students’ educational outcomes 	
K-8 Accountability	9-12 Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual testing in reading and math for grades 3-8 ● Testing in science once grades 3-5, 6-9 ● Statewide assessment standards for K-5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Testing in reading and math once in grades 10-12 ● Testing in science once grades 6-9 ● States may offer alternative assessments (ACT, SAT)

Note. Data compiled from James et al. (2016), pp. 1-2.

While it is too soon to determine the impact of ESSA on student achievement, data analysts have been able to survey student achievement data from 2002-2013 since the implementation of NCLB and RTTT. Overall, the growth of student achievement on standardized assessments has been minimal. Over the 10-year period, math proficiency scores increased from 16% to 27%, and 19% to 26% for reading (James et al., 2016). A major criticism of school reform is the tendency to improve student performance through a “one-size-fits-all” model, not taking into consideration the realities of low performing

discussed earlier in this chapter. States and districts are increasingly required to equate student proficiency with standardized test scores through the implementation of large-scale reform programs, standardized tests, and observations from outside reviewers (Brezicha et al., 2015). Reforming schools in such a complex and diverse environment requires a diverse and complex reform plan.

In summary, school reform programs are created to positively impact teaching and learning in schools through accountability, resulting in the standardization of curriculum and assessments and even teacher evaluations. DiGaetano (2015) describes this form of accountability as administrative, which provides a more visible and direct level of accountability for schools and districts. The use of letter grades to rate school performance and advanced software systems to determine the value of teacher performance is an example of administrative accountability used in various districts, including the Southeastern Public District. The three reform policies mentioned above serve as the foundation for the various reform models we have seen across the nation and particularly in the Southeastern Public School District and Lincoln Elementary School.

School Reform Models

Districts and schools across the nation have implemented a variety of school reform models to improve student achievement and teacher performance. Schools and districts choose a certain reform model for various reasons, based on school or district needs. The history of school reform starts with a major shift in standards and accountability through testing. In 2009, student performance data showed that students were not trending toward the 2014 100% proficiency requirement outlined in NCLB. As

a result of the concerns, the School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Race to the Top (RttT) programs provided states with four options to improve their lowest-performing schools: Turnaround, Restart/Conversion Charters, Closure, and Transformational. Schools and districts also implement these reform models with variations to align with the needs of the school. These reform models are primarily used in schools that are chronically low-performing and are showing a lack of progress—which tend to be minority, impoverished schools in urban settings. Table 6 below identifies the four reform models with the primary characteristic that delineates each model from the other.

Table 6.

Description of Comprehensive School Reform Strategies

Reform Strategy	Reform Description
Turnaround Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Replace principal ● Replace at least 50% of staff ● Implement a new instructional program
Restart Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close the school and restart as a charter school
School Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close the school, redistribute students to other more <i>highly achieving</i> schools
Transformational Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Replace the principal ● Implement Comprehensive Reforms

Source: Peck & Reitzug, 2014, p. 10.

Although each of these models is different and is created to serve different school needs, researchers and educators warn reform strategists that reform models still rely on a standard set of practices without considering the school’s “unique circumstances and

identity” (Peck & Reitzug, 2014, p. 21). For the reform to be successful, it is important for school and district leadership to consider all the characteristics of the model and align with the school or district needs. In this section, I will analyze the purpose, goal, effectiveness, and implications of the various reform programs.

Turnaround Model

The turnaround model, or “organizational turnaround,” was a popular improvement strategy between 1950 and 1960 in the business world. Corporate leaders implemented this strategy to improve organizational to improve output and avoid bankruptcy. The idea of turnaround is to “disrupt” the current environment enough to effect positive change (Meyers & Smylie, 2017, p. 6). Evidence, however, shows that only 10-25% of the impacted businesses come through the process successful, a major talking point of school reform critics argue the same for the success in schools (Mette & Scribner, 2014; Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). Even more, although schools may have found success at one point in time, the success was not sustainable (Lane et al., 2019). Even so, the turnaround model has become a drastic approach for states and districts that are seeking to make rapid improvements in their schools. Research states that this approach, however, is a point of frustration for families, school leaders, and policymakers due to the underwhelming improvement and the unintended consequences that are symptoms of the drastic measures, which are discussed in the following sections (Lane et al., 2019).

Reform Personnel

When parents, staff, and district employees hear the phrase ‘school turnaround,’ staff or administration replacement is a concern for all. In a turnaround model, at least 50% of staff are replaced, sometimes the entire staff, along with the school leadership (Cucchiara et al., 2015; Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Peck & Reitzug, 2014). In chronically low-performing schools, there is a perception that students are not performing well because of poor leadership and poor instructional practices from teachers. Researchers and education advocates alike argue that turnaround must reach beyond the train of thought that leadership and instructional deficiencies are the primary reason for the low academic performance of the schools. Lane et al. (2019) point out that “institutional factors such as socioeconomic status and chronic absenteeism, factors ... are circumstances beyond the teachers’ realm of influence” (p. 3). As with any practice or strategy used to effect change, there are implications or risks to consider. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the reality of low-performing schools can make it a hard-to-staff environment regarding recruitment or retention. Turnaround schools need teachers who are experienced and highly qualified; however, research shows the new staff tends to be “Whiter, younger, and less experienced” (Meyers & Smylie, 2017, p. 11). James et al. (2016) identify “cultural mismatch” as a reason for the lack of success in school reform in urban schools that primarily serve minority and impoverished students. The idea of staff replacement not only impacts teachers but also travels up to the leadership.

The replacement of the school principal is also a key aspect of the turnaround model. This practice centers on the same premise of teacher replacement: hiring a better,

stronger principal will lead to a successful reformation of the school. Meyers and Smylie (2017) and other researchers argue that changing the principal, while it may be necessary, just like replacing the teaching staff, does not always mean long-term success. Test scores may initially surge; however, they eventually plateau for a variety of reasons, including initial excitement for new leadership, continued resources and support, and promotions after success (Meyers & Smylie, 2017). Identifying, analyzing, and making changes in the structural and organizational practices are critical to sustaining and building off the progress made, regardless of who sits in the chair of leadership or leads in the classroom.

Reform Instructional Practice

Schools implementing the turnaround model have an “intensive focus on instructional improvement, heavy use of student achievement data, targeted curriculum and extra supports for struggling students, and new systems for monitoring and improving teacher practice” (Cucchiara et al., 2015, pp. 262–263). With such a focus on teacher practice, it is an important step in the turnaround process to identify and implement research-based instructional practices to address the deficiencies. Hitt and Meyers (2018) identify six practices to impact instruction and foster sustained success in a turnaround process:

- Practice 1: Establishing high standards and expectations for classroom instruction,
- Practice 2: Designing meaningful, engaging, and transformative professional development,

- Practice 3: Ensuring collective responsibility through individual performance feedback,
- Practice 4: Decreasing distractions from teaching and learning,
- Practice 5: Celebrating wins and accomplishments
- Practice 6: Creating organization to foster collaboration about teaching and learning (Hitt & Meyers, 2018, p. 21).

Schools and districts receive large sums of financial support to help with providing the six practices listed above, hence the popularity of the Race to the Top (RttT) program. Although the specific details of turnaround may differ from school to school, these two aspects drive the turnaround process. Although the turnaround model is the most popular reform strategy, researchers and education advocates caution policy makers and school leaders about the implications of such a drastic strategy whose impact reaches beyond student achievement.

Restart Reform Model/Conversion Charters

The Restart Reform Model has a direct connection to the public education concept of charter schools, resulting in schools known as conversion charters. Although charter schools have been a part of school reform for over 20 years, this specific model has become more common in recent years, especially with the resurgence of interest in charter schools. In conversion charters, the student body and school facility remain the same, while the leadership and teaching staff are replaced to improve instruction and student performance. New Orleans, Tennessee (Achievement School District ASD), and most recently, North Carolina, have put this reform model in place (General Assembly of

North Carolina, 2016). The details of the individual state's policy may look different, but the overall process is the same—the district closes the lowest-performing school(s) and reopens it as a charter school under the control of a Charter or Educational Management Operator, hiring a new teaching faculty and school leadership (Duke, 2012). The Restart Model is the newest reform strategy for public education reform and therefore does not provide a lot of data to determine effectiveness as an issue for some critics (Bickmore & Dowell, 2015).

What would make a traditional public-school district venture into the charter world? Charter schools can be compared to a magnet school in a traditional public-school district, providing students with an innovative, unique learning experience. Charter schools are “public schools approved by state entities or local boards that allow greater autonomy over curriculum, instruction, human resource functions, and operation than traditional public schools” (Bickmore & Dowell, 2015, p. 47). In this model, the district turns over the day-to-day operation of the school to the selected Charter Management Organization (CMO) that can provide proof of success. The CMO is responsible for hiring staff, providing development and curriculum, and ensuring high-quality instruction and high student achievement occurs. Duke (2012) states that change in teaching practice is likely with the restart model reform as charter schools are founded on innovative teaching as well as a cultural shift with a replacement of the entire staff—including school leadership.

In this area of school reform, districts are looking for different strategies to foster student success, and the uniqueness and flexibility of charter schools tend to be enticing

characteristics. The amount of data on the success of this reform is little to none, as this is still a new type of reform. North Carolina is phasing schools into the Innovative School District, adding the second school in the 2019-2020 school year. Tennessee started this reform initiative in 2011 and saw inconsistent results in their conversion charters from in the first three years. Overall, like the results of school reform from other turnaround strategies mentioned earlier, conversion charters produced small gains in reading, math, and science.

School Closure

School closure, one of the more drastic measures of school reform, is too dramatic for some and necessary to others, impacting urban schools more than others. It is only recently that school closure has been considered as a school reform model to impact student performance. Previously school closures were an option to consolidate schools and address financial issues in a district (Sunderman et al., 2017, p. 5). Unlike the restart reform model, the district or state decides to close the school completely, redistributing impacted students to higher-performing schools—to never open again.

Since the early 2000s, the beginning of NCLB, approximately 2% of schools have closed each year, impacting 200,000 students each year (Sunderman et al., 2017). There are various reasons cited for school closing: enrollment decline, pressures to decrease spending, deteriorating facilities, poor academic performance, and decrease of demand for traditional public schools (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). Supporters of this model argue that it aligns with the goal of providing equitable learning environments for students. In contrast, critics argue that low socio-economic families are impacted at a higher rate than

others, causing a major disruption to their lives and community, solely or primarily based on standardized testing scores (Sunderman et al., 2017). As a result, a major decision is made while ignoring the value and needs of the diverse stakeholder groups in the school community (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015).

Student Impact

The results are mixed depending on various things, such as the receiving school and other factors based on the individual student. Data showed that within the first year of transfer, some districts saw opposite outcomes to the desired, specifically absenteeism. There was a major impact on school culture and climate as students had difficulty building strong, genuine relationships with adults and students in their new schools (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, student mobility and instability are a reality of low-performing schools and poor students. Attending the same school year after year offers a level of stability, sometimes the only stability for students and families. School closure exacerbates that issue, although with good intentions.

Deeds and Pattillo (2015) also found that in the first year, students' academic performance decreased, with some students showing progress in the second year. This is vital to the purpose of the reform, causing schools and students to have to make up for the progress lost in the first year to show a trend of growth. More importantly, school closure showed to have a negative impact on social and academic performance when students are transferred to schools of low quality, compared to students who were transferred to high-performing schools. Research has shown that sometimes the higher-performing school may not provide a significantly better experience for the students. One study, tracking 18

school closures, showed that only 6% of the students transferred to a school in the top 25% of the district, failing to meet the goal of placing students in significantly higher-performing schools, while 40% of the students were transferred to a school on probation (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015, p. 479; Sunderman et al., 2017). Students transferring to high-performing schools, the true purpose of this model, showed academic and attendance improvement.

Teacher Impact

Like the turnaround and restart reform models, teachers and school leaders are released from their positions. Teachers are required to reapply for another position with the hopes of securing another position. Based on the district policy, that is not always guaranteed. Research has used terms like “demoralized,” “belittled,” “disrespected,” “powerless,” “loss of confidence,” and “stressed and burned out” (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015, pp. 486-487; see also Lane et al., 2019). Again, critics argue that the blame is placed on the teachers, not taking into consideration the other aspects of the school’s reality, particularly urban schools, that impact overall school performance.

Parent and Community Impact

Although the school may be ‘failing,’ parents also send their children to schools for the familial and familiar environment (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). In urban and neighborhood-based schools, there is something I call “the multi-generational effect” to consider. Grandparents, parents, and students have a shared experience, as they have attended the same school, something that should not be discounted. Schools thrive on

community support, especially high-needs schools. Dismantling schools with a present community base could have an adverse impact.

Overall, school closure as a reform model has yet to provide data showing that this is the most effective school reform model. The decision to close a school has shown to have both a positive and negative impact on students, teachers, and the school community. The previous three models discussed impact school staff on a large scale, along with the organizational structure. The final reform model aims to transform the school through effective leadership and a comprehensive school reform program.

Comprehensive School Reform Model

The final reform model is the Comprehensive School Reform Model (CSR). There are a few key differences between this model and the previously mentioned models. Diem and Brooks (2013) note in the CSR Model there is a focus on improvement for “entire schools rather than on particular populations of students within schools; and it is not limited to particular subjects, programs, or instructional methods” (Desimone, 2002, p. 434). There is not a full-scale removal of staff members but rather an overhaul of practice in areas such as professional development or instructional practice (Lee & Min, 2017). The principal is the only faculty member replaced (Duke, 2012). While the transformational model implies a lack of quality instruction, there is an opportunity to train and encourage growth and improvement in the staff. With CSR, the primary focus is on the characteristics of effective schools and helping the new leadership and current staff implement those practices to improve the school overall. The focus is also on improving various aspects of schooling, not just solely focusing on achievement, certain

content areas or instructional methods such as “shared goals, a positive school climate, school-level management, strong district and principal leadership and support, an articulated curriculum and organizational structure, maximized learning time, schoolwide staff development, and parental involvement” (Desimone, 2002, p. 434). Schools implementing a CSR Model could choose from a list of model programs provided or create their own model using personalized approaches to the various areas or strategies (a) use research-based innovative strategies and methods; (b) have a schoolwide reform plan that enables students to meet state standards based on school needs assessments; (c) provide ongoing, high-quality professional development for staff; (d) have measurable student goals and benchmarks for meeting those goals; (e) maintain faculty, administrative, and staff support; (f) nurture meaningful parent and community involvement; (g) use high quality external technical support; (h) include a plan for evaluating the implementation and student achievement; and (i) identify other resources available and how they will be used to coordinate services to support and sustain the reform (Desimone, 2002).

The CSR Model was popular in the early 2000s with the passing of NCLB in 2001 and the pressures that came with the policy. Between 1998 and 2005, schools were provided with a grant to implement a CSR Design for 3 years, with the federal government giving over \$1 billion to 6,700 schools. After a few years of implementation, the data from CSR implementation was inconsistent and inconclusive, with various studies finding the majority of CSR implementation “have failed to reach their goal or achieve meaningful results in program schools, particularly those in the early stages of

program implementation” (Lee & Min, 2017, p. 372). By 2006, the Department of Education began to phase out the program in favor of the other three models (Gross et al., 2009). Although schools did experience an increase in student achievement, analysts argue that data does not identify CSR implementation as the sole reason. Although the federal government no longer funds CSR directly, states and districts continue to implement forms of CSR designs in their schools. This can be seen in schools and districts like Lincoln Elementary School and Southeastern Public School District.

Although the Turnaround, Restart, School Closure, and Transformational reform models have very distinct characteristics, there is one common goal to improve student achievement and school performance. The different approaches to school improvement in each model all require one thing—teachers and leaders to bring life to the strategies on paper. From the beginning of school reform, the quality and efforts of the adults in the building have been a focus of each reform model. While the value of effective leadership and instruction is noted in reform program policy and research, there is little research providing insight into the teacher and leader experience in the implementation. If policymakers and those who make decisions regarding school reform are oblivious to the importance of educator perception, they foster a top-down culture, threatening the success of the school so many are working so hard to create.

Educator Perception and School Reform

The body of research on educator experience during school reform continues to grow. However, there is still a large gap in research of teacher experience in different reform models and different schools, taking into consideration the organizational

structure, culture, and practices that impact day-to-day experiences (Cucchiara et al., 2015). As stated earlier, the purpose of my study is to contribute to the growing body of research on school reform with a targeted focus on educator experience and perception, particularly school leaders. Although school reform identifies principals as a key lever to school success, there is not a lot of research showing the leader's experience. Researchers and policy analysts boast that teacher attitude, buy-in, and motivation are vital to the success of reform programs. It is the teachers who must understand the changes to correctly implement new curriculum or instructional practices (Donnell & Gettinger, 2015; Lee & Min, 2017). As mentioned in the previous section, professional development for teachers and leaders and teacher working conditions are key areas of focus in school reform program implementation and are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Professional Development

Teachers participating in the implementation of a school reform program are aware of the intensity of professional development required of them. Through various studies, researchers have found that teachers viewed professional development as too frequent, not useful, or practical, especially for veteran teachers (Lane et al., 2019). Donnell and Gettinger (2015) state that teachers implementing school reform valued collaboration time with their colleagues to participate in decision-making discussions, something that is lost or overlooked in professional development as well. Lane et al. (2019) found that teachers experienced a “regimented style of direct instruction without opportunities for discussion or participation,” impacting engagement and morale during

the early stages of implementation (Lane et al., 2019, p. 6). Teachers list other characteristics that make professional development worthwhile and impactful on their acceptability of the reform initiative: continuous and ongoing, differentiated to meet individual teacher needs, and relevance and applicability to the classroom setting. When professional development addresses these three aspects, teachers will employ a more positive approach to the program (Donnell & Gettinger, 2015).

True school reform takes place over multiple years, at least three according to research (Cucchiara et al., 2015). More recent data states that turnaround success can take longer if leaders are truly aiming to make organizational and procedural changes within the building to ensure sustainable change beyond the initial years (Meyers & Smylie, 2017). Through the various reform programs, districts and schools are required to provide ongoing professional development that aligns with the school goals. During the implementation of school reform, an effective leader should be skilled in transformational and differentiated leadership. Differentiated leadership, according to Brezicha et al. (2015), values teacher community and creating a shared vision. As a result, leadership creates an environment that fosters collaboration and problem-solving. Leaders are building teacher capacity, and teachers are provided the space to think critically about their practice, giving them the autonomy to create their own growth plan (Brezicha et al., 2015, p. 100). Autonomy is also key to creating a positive environment where teachers accept and support the reform initiatives and work hard to make the program successful.

Working Conditions

Teacher retention is key to the overall success of school reform, and the environment in which teachers work each day has an impact on their decision to remain at the low-performing school. Schools that show a positive response to school reform have leaders who create an environment in which teachers want to stay and work to help children succeed. Viano et al. (2021) identified five processes or areas that impact teacher decisions to teach and remain in low-performing schools: safe environment (discipline), administrative support, consistent enforcement of discipline, administrative support, and high-quality professional development. Cucchiara et al. (2015) found that teachers thrived when leaders genuinely listened and empowered them to do great work and not just focus on compliance and reform tasks. This type of leadership also encouraged teacher development and a culture of trust, where teachers were vulnerable and open to feedback, increasing their growth as professionals. Respect as professionals is valuable to teachers, especially in school reform, where it is easy to create an environment where teachers do not feel like individuals and are expected to deliver curriculum instead of using their professional judgment to deliver high-quality instruction. Ineffective reform implementation reflected a sense of powerlessness. Adhering to instructional pacing and other instructional checklists became a priority, thus creating a tense environment where job security and low morale becomes a concern (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). Viano et al. (2021) also note that poor-performing teachers create a stressful working environment for staff during school reform. Replacing poor teachers with effective and/or high-

performing teachers had a positive effect on the working conditions, teacher morale and even decreased the amount of teacher turnover from year to year.

When teacher job performance and security rests on how well they execute the reform strategies and initiatives, the effectiveness and understanding of the organizational procedures and processes are important. Leadership, both school and district, must identify and communicate clear visions and messages to guide the team. Cucchiara et al. (2015) use *organizational function* to describe “operation, clarity of roles and expectations and institutionalization of key values and priorities” (Cucchiara et al., 2015, p. 267). Schools with inconsistent routines and procedures, lack of planning, lack of accountability, and lack of coherence between school, district, and reform program leadership struggled to implement school reform effectively and boast the expected success outlined in the school reform plan.

The school reform models discussed throughout the literature had a clear impact on the work expectation and intensity of the school-level practitioners. Classroom and instructional staff saw their work and value directly connected to student performance on standardized testing. This added more accountability and a more rigid expectation of teaching strategies and curriculum. School reform models also placed emphasis on development and training to improve teaching practices. The high expectation of development and training also revealed itself through the requirement of being “highly qualified,” as first introduced in NCLB. Teachers and school administrators found themselves having to manage this expectation through additional training, hiring

practices, recruitment, and addressing teacher turnover if those credentials were not secured or performance was below expectation.

Along with managing staffing, school-level administrators were also tasked with being the instructional leader of the school. Although districts, states, or curriculum programs may support the implementation of development, school leaders were held accountable for the execution and implementation of the practices introduced during those intense trainings for teachers. Accountability was the biggest change to the role of the educators working in school reform. The focus on each of the goals, expectations, and practices was clear, and the success marker was clearly communicated. School-level practitioners had to adjust to the high level of transparency regarding the school's performance and be prepared to address the data directly.

Literature Review Summary and Overview

School reform has a long history in America's public education system. Education and political leaders provide various programs, strategies, and opportunities for schools to find success along with financial support. Since 2002, billions of dollars have been invested into school reform. Federally mandated school reform programs such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), School Improvement Grant (SIG), Race to the Top (RttT), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) all create a sense of urgency for district and school leaders to adjust their practices and to provide an equitable and excellent education to millions of students across the nation. There is a great deal of research on the types of school reform programs, school reform best practices, and case studies on school reform implementations. Although school reform programs have major

implications for school leaders, teachers, students, and parents, there is little research on the experience and perceptions of the stakeholders during the implementation process of school reform, in this case, teachers and school leaders. With teacher turnover being a major reality of low performing schools, a focus on school reform and staff impact is an important piece of the research that is lacking.

Intentional efforts to create positive working conditions and high-quality professional development are key to successful school reform. Regardless of the model, the success and experience of the teachers are important to the success of the program. School reform is challenging and complex, requiring a shift in professional and instructional practices, along with the mindset of all stakeholders. In this study, I focus on teachers and school leadership perception of various reform models, an important piece in this body of research. With the unique history of Lincoln Elementary School and Southeastern Public School District, it is my goal to impact school reform research, helping leaders to implement effective programs that in turn improve our schools, students, teachers, and leaders.

CHAPTER III

STUDY METHODOLOGY

In 2016, the State Board of Education and State Legislature created statutes to address low-performing schools, laying the foundation for the Primary School Model Program (PSM). After districts identified the low-performing schools, each school would receive intensive and intentional support throughout the school year from both the district and state levels. Current school reform research provides a vast amount of data on the efforts and effectiveness of school leadership, the impact of instructional strategies and effective teaching on student performance, strategies for teacher retention, and the impact of segregated schools on families and communities, while research and data around educator perception and experience during school reform has been lacking (Ayscue, Siegel-Hawley, et al., 2018; Boger & Orfield, 2005; Cucchiara et al., 2015). The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge and understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the faculty and staff at LES during the implementation of the Primary School Model Program as a recurring low-performing school. Additionally, there has been national interest in the best practices and strategies to improve public schooling—particularly those that serve impoverished and minority communities.

Research Questions

In qualitative research, crafting effective research questions is instrumental to the success of the study. The questions should reflect what the research continues to be the

most important factors to study and identifying “what questions are most central to your study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 78). Qualitative research questions are intended to be broad and help to identify the areas of focus for interview questions, with a possibility for multiple individual questions or sub-questions that support a primary question, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016). My research study led to one broad question and two sub-questions to provide additional detail to the study.

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of educators at Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program (PSM)?
 - a. What lessons have staff and district leaders learned from their experience of implementing the Primary Support Model Program?
 - b. What do educators perceive to be best practices for school improvement during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program?

In the subsequent sections, I have provided context to key aspects, moments, and details that are vital to the completion of this study. I conducted a preliminary study and have provided a summary of that experience and the implications for the case study of Lincoln Elementary School. The other information provided in this section will inform the reader of the specific methodology, design, and strategies used to answer the research questions mentioned above.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is important in determining if a qualitative research study can be labeled as a case study, “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system”

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). The first step to labeling the research study is to understand what makes a system bounded. A bounded system is a person, a program, or an event at the center of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis of the PSM Program, and interviews of a specific group of teachers and leaders meet the criteria of a bounded system. LES fits this criterion because of its unique history of student performance and student population within SPD, another key characteristic of a bounded system. Creswell goes on to further define case study research as research where the principal investigator “explores a bounded system ... over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 40).

Preliminary Study

The purpose of a preliminary study, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), should reach beyond practicing data collection methods. There should be a focus on the experience and lessons learned along with the execution of data collection and analysis. In preparation for this case study, I completed a preliminary study with a participant base that mirrored the faculty and staff of Lincoln Elementary School. The preliminary study was focused on two main goals: confirming the interview protocol and finalizing a data analysis process. I believe these goals were vital to the actual implementation of the data collection methods and data analysis strategies. In the following sections, a brief description of the process and the lessons learned is provided.

Interviews

In the original research plan, there were multiple schools involved with a focus on the experience of the principals from each school. Immediately it was evident that finding principals who were willing or able to share their time or experience could prove to be a major limitation. During the preliminary interview with Principal Jackson, I quickly found that while school principals were key participants in the implementation of school reform, she highlighted student support staff such as the school counselor, social worker, and, of course, the teachers as an integral part of PSM. After the first interview, I saw the value of analyzing the impact and experience of the PSM with more depth, capturing their perceptions from various angles. After careful consideration and reflection, I concluded that I would use LES as my sole setting for data collection as a bounded case study from the start of PSM implementation until the current date. After such a change, I needed to restructure my interview protocols and questions to collect the most impactful and relevant data to answer my research questions. In addition to the principal, the interview protocol would need to address other staff she deemed as important pieces to the PSM puzzle: assistant principals, social worker/counselor, and teachers. This preliminary study helped me to refine my questions, identify the type of participants, and finally, my approach to recruiting participants.

Documents

Document analysis was an important aspect of research preparation and data analysis. This data helped me to determine participants, create and adjust questions for interviews. Along with the PSM description, I also located articles and found a variety of

news documents and announcements that I found helpful in crafting questions to address the perception of the PSM program, particularly the concerns identified in the articles by community and district leadership. Locating and analyzing the statutes and laws that led to the policy was important as well in the document analysis. Using this document helped to give me a view into the intended purpose and expectations of the reform program, a strategy carried over into the actual research case study.

Initial Findings and Lessons Learned

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) point out the importance of pilot interviews in identifying effective and ineffective questioning techniques. The preliminary study emphasized questions that needed to be included while bringing attention to questions that were awkwardly worded and yielded off-topic or ineffective answers. One of the sub-questions asked participants directly how they perceive their role in the PSM program, specifically how the policy impacts their role execution. Analyzing the documents to identify where participant roles are specifically implicated or identified was key to answering the research questions. After completion of this pilot study, I was able to finalize a research design and methodology to execute a successful and impactful qualitative study.

Research Design

With a purpose of identifying and sharing the perceptions and experiences of school employees during the implementation of a school reform program, there is an emphasis on “how people make sense of their lives and their experiences, how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they

attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Yin (2014) lists three conditions to use when determining the research design: (a) the type of research question posed, (b) the extent of control a researcher has over actual behavioral events, and (c) the degree of focus on contemporary events (compared to a focus on historical events; Yin, 2014). Using the conditions, I performed a litmus test to determine the best method for my research, outlined below.

Research Method Litmus Test and Justification

The types of research questions addressed in a study are categorized using the familiar structure “who,” “what,” “where,” “how,” and “why.” The research questions used in this study mainly focus on the “how” and “why,” which are more explanatory in nature (Yin, 2014, p. 10). The goal of this study was to provide the opportunity for school employees to explain and share their experiences and perceptions of PSM. This first litmus test helps me to determine whether this is a case study, historical study, or experimental study.

The second phase of the litmus test is identifying the level of focus on contemporary or historical events. While there are many similarities between a case study and a historical study, one determining factor is direct observation of events and interviews of those involved in the events as primary sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). In my study, I had the opportunity to observe participants in interviews and to hear them share their feelings, experiences, and perceptions firsthand.

Although a researcher can use multiple methods within a study, there are instances such as this when one method has a distinct advantage. Because the “how and

why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, that the researcher has little or no control,” a case study is the better method choice (Yin, 2014, p. 14). Case studies are also unique because of the access to a variety of evidence: documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations, allowing the researcher to convey what was learned about a phenomenon or contemporary event (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Study Setting

Southeastern Public School District (SPD), a large school district located in the southeastern part of the United States, serves families from rural, urban, and suburban areas. SPD uses a geographic attendance zone policy to determine student assignment, apart from specialty schools or “choice schools.” These schools, like magnet schools, require an application process and serve as an example of a type of school reform used by the district, as discussed in Chapter II. Parents get the opportunity to select another school for their child if the base, or assigned school, is considered low performing. While the plan did not determine student placement by race, the strong correlation between race and socio-economic status has strong implications for the racial composition of the student body in each school. With this student assignment policy, schools such as Lincoln Elementary School, which pulls most of its students and families from high poverty areas, struggle to maintain student growth and proficiency. As LES enters the fourth year as a low-performing school, there continues to be a focus on creating and maintaining an environment of high-quality instruction and high student performance through intentional and strategic improvement planning.

Lincoln Elementary School (LES) is the single setting for this case study. LES continues to be a high-needs school that has had to navigate various changes and turnover prior to the arrival of the current participants. LES had four principals in 3 years, with the fourth principal being the current participant, Ray Martin. The assistant principal is also new to the staff, speaking to the shifting of leadership to support school growth. LES has also had curriculum and instructional practice reform, as school and district leadership searched for strategies, practices, and resources to support teacher development and positive student outcomes.

In 2016, LES, along with other schools in SPD labeled as low-performing, began the implementation of the PSM Program to strengthen the five areas identified in the PSM Framework, which also serves as the conceptual framework for this study. To gain access to this setting, I wrote and submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina Greensboro and the Southeastern School District Research Department. In the various applications and proposals, I discussed the purpose, benefit, and significance of the study. All applications are submitted online through the district or university platform, where an oversight committee reviews the information and communicates approval to continue with the research. To be considered for approval by SPD, the district's Data and Analytics Department required that this study be approved by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro prior to submission.

Participants

For this specific case study, I worked with nine participants from various positions within LES. The participant positions range from administration, instructional

leadership, teachers, and student support. Along with guidance from the principal, participants were selected based on the PSM Policy framework and school roles that were directly impacted by policy guidelines. Initially, in the research plan, the school administrators, instructional coach, social worker/counselor would participate in one-on-one interviews, while classroom teachers, including special education and English Language Learner teachers, would participate in a focus group. Including teachers who serve a variety of student populations was important to me in ensuring that I captured a wide perspective of the program. There are no student or parent participants in this study. Table 7 provides the names of the participants and their roles using pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of all.

Table 7.

Participant Information

Participants			
Name	Role	Years at LES	Years of Experience*
Ray Martin	Principal	6	4
Tine Ward	Assistant Principal	2	2
Ebony Simon	Instructional Coach	2	2
Tony Wilson	Kindergarten Teacher	4	13
Jean Peak	Fourth Grade Teacher	2	5
Vonda Gill	Fifth Grade Teacher	1	1
Clinton Smith	English Language Learner	2	25
Rose Brown	Behavior Support Coach	1	1
Benjamin Ward	Social Worker	1	1

Note. * Years of experience in the identified role.

Data Collection Methods

Basic qualitative data consist of “interviews, observations, focus groups and document analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 52–53). I decided to use these three of the four methods to complete the study and provide a well-rounded, clear, and unbiased view of educator perceptions and experiences of the PSM Program at LES during the 2019-2020 school year. Patton points out that the researcher must provide direct quotations from interviews, describe behaviors and actions from observations, and extract pertinent information from the documents while gaining an in-depth understanding of an otherwise unknown topic through focus groups (as cited in Parker & Tritter, 2006). The triangulation of the collected data is pertinent to the validity, trustworthiness, and impact of this study. In the following sections, I will discuss the process and justification of the data collection methods used to study the perceptions and experiences of this relatively new school reform program. It is important to note that the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations due to this event will be discussed in the section entitled, Areas of Consideration.

Interviews

Person to person encounters between the researcher and participant is the most common form of interview used to obtain “a special kind of information that is in and on someone else’s mind” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). After the execution of the pilot study conducted in Spring 2018 discussed earlier in the chapter, I decided to use two distinct interview guides, one for the administration and instructional leadership and the other for the classroom and support staff (social worker and counselor). The types of

interviews used in qualitative research depend on the purpose of the research. The three options are highly structured/standardized, unstructured/informal, and semi-structured, with the latter being used in this case study. In the semi-structured interview, the researcher uses a combination of structured and unstructured questions. This style of interview allows for flexible wording, flexible order of questioning, and adjustments to questions based on responses during the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the interviewer, it was important to me that the interview was a natural and comfortable experience for everyone involved; using a semi-structured format helped create that climate. During the interview, I took a direct approach to the interview by briefing my interviewees of the objective of the interview prior to our time together, encouraging an environment of transparency.

For this research study, I conducted interviews with nine participants. Each initial interview ranged from 105 to 120 minutes. I conducted one formal interview for each participant; however, each participant was very flexible and willing to answer my follow-up questions through shared documents of their transcripts or emails. The principal spent the most time with me, as he provided additional information such as staff availability, PSM programming information, and school information through phone calls or emails.

Interviews and the Conceptual Framework

Using a thematic approach when conducting an interview is a suggested technique by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). The Dimensions of Support from the PSM Policy were used to categorize the questions, objectives, and pace of the interview. Although there are five dimensions in the PSM Policy, LES only uses four of them to help guide their reform

planning and implementation—Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment, Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity, Dimension 3: Professional Capacity, and Dimension 5: Families and Community.

The interviews were executed in two phases: Administration/School Leadership and Teaching/Support staff. The purpose of the two-phase approach was to use themes and areas of focus identified in Phase 1 to inform questioning for Phase 2 of the interviews. The administration and teachers have different viewpoints of the implementation of the reform program due to the scope of their roles and responsibilities. As school administration and instructional leadership, they have a “balcony view” of the reform implementation. The teachers and support staff included in this research provided a more detailed view, or “dance floor” view and experience. As a result, it was easier to see similarities and differences between perceptions and experiences, which were evident across the board.

Document Analysis

Document analysis ensures validity to the study and provides context for interview and focus group questions. This data collection method is the only method that continued throughout this study. Collecting and researching documents was not only the first step in my process, but I continued to search for documents as new information was discovered. Data stability is just one advantage of document analysis as a data collection method. Data found in documents are not impacted or altered by humans and occur only in their natural setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the public record documents included official and ongoing documents related to PSM, such as the law

statutes, planning guides, guidance documents, rubrics, and any other documents used to support LES in implementation.

Public Records

The governing state requires a high level of transparency of schools implementing the PSM Program, which has proven to be beneficial for this study. The implementation expectations are publicly placed on the state website, while the specific school improvement planning document is posted on the school and district website. All stakeholders, teachers, community members, and parents have access to the school improvement document immediately after it has been updated. After each meeting, the improvement team is required to update progress for each dimension and indicator. Guidance and planning documents are also accessible on the statewide website, providing the highest level of transparency for interested parties and stakeholders. For purposes of this case study, I was able to follow along with the progress and discussions that took place during the team meetings. This was vital to providing context and foundation for my questions, analysis, and recommendations.

Context of Data Collection

Shortly before the start of data collection, we entered the COVID-19 Pandemic. The mode used for the interviews was directly impacted by this event, requiring the use of virtual interviews and electronic communication throughout the process. Initial communication, such as introductions and interview scheduling, was through phone or email conversations. All interviews were conducted and recorded through a teleconferencing platform and stored in a password-protected location. I was concerned

that this would impact the participants' willingness to participate or have high engagement. Overall, I do not think that this impacted the quality of data and engagement from the participants. They shared willingly and with a high level of transparency.

Being forced to complete interviews through a virtual platform required me to reflect on my planned data collection methods, particularly when it came to conducting focus groups. Interacting virtually in a group setting provides its own challenges, especially when I had to consider the purpose of my decision to include a focus group as a data collection method. Research experts state that “group dynamics and synergistic relationships among participants,” “participant’s comfort and level of distractions,” and non-verbal communication is important in generating strong data. All these key aspects of focus groups could be impacted by the virtual platform and the possibility of technical issues (Nyumba et al., 2018). As a result, I decided to conduct interviews with each participant instead of focus groups with the teachers, which ended up providing rich data for the case study.

Data Analysis Strategies

In qualitative research, the analysis starts when the research begins and does not end until the research is submitted (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The process of qualitative data analysis requires the researcher to chunk the data into small parts, putting it back together to find the bigger picture, known as an inductive process (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used keyword analysis, coding, and category construction to identify the themes of the research to answer the research questions.

Coding and Category Construction

Coding, an integral part of data analysis, requires the researcher to use words or phrases to identify meaning and support assignment to the specific categories, revisiting every aspect of the data, creating an inventory and amplifying the voices of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Linnenberg & Korsgaard, 2019). In this study, coding was the primary method of data analysis used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' thoughts and feelings in the interviews or focus groups. Qualitative researchers identify two types of coding development processes: Inductive and Deductive (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Inductive coding, a more direct and organic approach, focuses more on phrases or words used by the participants to develop codes and construct categories. The benefit of this process is the connection between the data and codes. In this process, the codes are "loyal to the data" (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 263) and give a more parallel view of the individual thoughts and perceptions of the participants. During the initial analysis, codes were used to identify phrases or thoughts that were relevant to the study. The codes were keywords or phrases/descriptors, such as 'commitment,' 'accountability,' 'professional development,' or 'previous experience.' The common codes found across multiple transcripts were then connected to the dimensions within the conceptual framework by their identifying number. For example, one of the novice teachers discussed the impact that teacher leaders had on their professional practice connecting to Dimension 3. The coding for that unit of data was 'support,' 'teacher leader,' and 'collaboration,' these data connected to the sub-dimension 3.2, creating a more in-depth analysis and a stronger connection to the conceptual

framework, substantiating the importance and relevance of the information shared by the participant.

Consequently, a researcher can find there are a high number of codes due to the specificity of this process, which happened during this case study. The high number of codes required me to analyze the codes in cycles, creating higher levels of categories to combine and decrease the number of codes, as suggested (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 263). Deductive coding, a more focused approach, uses a pre-defined list of codes based on the framework theory and issues mentioned in the existing literature. While the theoretical framework did play a role in categorizing the codes and themes, deductive coding was not the initial approach to data analysis in this case study. After careful coding, I combined words and phrases that were similar to eliminate redundancy and ensure the initial coding was appropriate and aligned with the statement. After the coding and connection to the dimensions, the subsequent step in the process involved interpretation and reflection on the meaning of the statements to help group the codes into thematic categories.

Categories are used to identify what aspects of the data that is relevant or important to the study, such as the perceptions and experiences of the participants around the areas of focus (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of the PSM Program as the conceptual framework was an important step in identifying themes, but most importantly, themes that worked across multiple or all categories. A major limitation that I had to consider was that the use of the PSM Program as the framework limits the opportunity for me to create categories organically based on the responses from the participants.

Constructing categories as effectively as possible requires a high level of analysis, specifically when coding and assigning themes. Because the categories were constructed pre-coding, it provided me a strong foundation for analysis, helping me to ensure the coding was focused on the answers to the research questions and the literature (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations

Because of my experiences as an educator and administrator, I recognize that I am predisposed to biases from my own experiences. I was a part of conversations and school reform policies in various districts and schools. Furthermore, I grew up hearing conversations as my parents were both district and state-level education administrators who worked with districts like SPD to help schools like LES. As the sole researcher, it was important that I created an environment that ensured that I conducted an ethical study with as little bias as possible and the highest level of trustworthiness and validity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) list eight strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of qualitative studies. Below I have listed the primary strategies used in this study.

Triangulation

Triangulation is described as “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm the emerging findings” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). In this case, there were multiple sources of data used (focus group interviews, interviews, document analysis) to answer the research questions. For example, I compared information captured in an interview about Professional Capacity with conversations from the focus group as compared to the indicators and expectations from

the PSM document. Triangulating within types of data is a suggested strategy as well, requiring the researcher to cross-check data from multiple interviews with people with differing perspectives. Interviewing the principal and assistant principals provides me with that varied perspective and experience through a dimension of the framework. It is important to note that triangulation does not imply that this strategy only works with three pieces of data. While triangulation can suggest limiting data analysis to three sources, current research supports the benefit of crystallizing rather than triangulating to allow for the consideration of multiple data sources and angles to increase validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After careful triangulation, the data sometimes showed a need to conduct follow-up interviews, search for additional related documents or research.

Member Checks

Employing this strategy requires the researchers to take “tentative interpretations/ findings back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). I used this strategy throughout my study as a regular part of data analysis to avoid misinterpretations and biases from my data collection, as suggested by Maxwell (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This strategy was extremely important to me, as I focused on identifying and eliminating research bias in my analysis based on my personal experience. In the spirit of truly amplifying their voices, this strategy also allowed the participants to clarify or tweak their perspectives, ensuring sure their voices are heard correctly. After I received and read through the transcript, I transferred the transcript to a document-sharing platform, which allowed me

to speak with the participants in real time. Participants were able to easily identify any parts that they would like to be removed from the data analysis, which took place with one participant. This was extremely helpful in that key feedback from the participant was easily accessible, participant validation was easy to capture, and I was able to also follow up with participants for additional information or clarity.

Researcher's Position or Reflexivity

Acknowledging one's assumptions, experiences, beliefs, or theories is important when conducting studies with the highest level of integrity. When considering researcher positionality and reflexivity, the researcher must exhibit self-reflection "regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249, 259). When these positions are made clear, the reader can understand my interpretations of the data. Critical researchers identify two relationship issues that can impact the validity and trustworthiness of the study, which can prove to be impactful in this study: insider/outsider and positionality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As an educator in hyper-segregated schools, on both ends of the continuum, my interest lies in the successes, failures, and implications of homogeneous environments. Eleven of my 13 years in education have been in low-performing or turnaround schools with a high-poverty and high-minority student population, giving me hands-on experience with school resegregation and school reform. The remaining years took place in hyper-segregated schools on the other end of the spectrum, working with an affluent, diverse, and high-performing student population.

These different experiences have shaped my research interest over the recent years, especially in the school reform programs implemented to foster high student and teacher performance in high-needs, low-performing schools. I believe that my experiences gave me insider status with the participants, gaining their trust. I do recognize that I have a lot of experience in schools like LES and must be mindful of imposing my biases and experiences on the participants, especially with my follow-up questions during the interviews and focus groups.

Rich, Thick Descriptions

The choice of words is the foundation of any qualitative study. My goal as the primary researcher is to collect enough data to “provide enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and hence whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Creating descriptive accounts requires me to describe the setting, the participants, and the findings using quotes from participants, descriptions from my observations of behavior during the focus group, and data from the documents.

Data Reporting and Areas of Considerations

Identifying and accepting the possible limitations of this study is important in ensuring the trustworthiness, validity, and effectiveness of any qualitative study such as this. While the points listed below were not specific limitations of this case study, I wanted to identify areas that were important to ensuring this case study was completed with the highest level of fidelity and transparency.

- **Explaining the purpose of the inquiry and methods:** Effectively communicating the purpose and methods of the study is important in creating an environment of trust between the participants and the researcher. Each participant received a recruitment email outlining the purpose of the study, the extent of their participation, the time requirement, and the level of anonymity. Participants were also asked to complete an online survey accepting or declining the invitation for participation. In the survey, again, they were reminded of the purpose and commitment while also having the opportunity to communicate further questions they have directly to the researcher. Participants also had the opportunity to ask for a phone call to address questions or concerns.
- **Risk Assessment:** When collecting and analyzing data on public school performance, there is a definite risk in that school districts must be mindful of the perception of their successes. This study will certainly shine a light on the successes and failures. It is a high risk for districts, as this requires a level of vulnerability leadership. For me, as the researcher, without the maximum variation of data, the trustworthiness and validity of the study are compromised. There is also a risk that participants could not be completely honest during the focus group interviews, interviews, or observation for fear of the implications of participating in a study such as this.
- **Data Access and Ownership:** To execute this study with the highest-level validity, credibility, and ethics, the researcher will need access to data, not just

numbers, but to participants and other related personnel. Because this study takes place during the COVID-19 Pandemic, there are multiple implications on data access to consider. Schools were closed during this time, so access to personnel did not take place in the traditional way. All communication was virtual, either through email or video teleconferencing. During this pandemic, schedules seemed to be flexible; however, interviewing and conducting focus group interviews in this mode can be difficult. This is especially true in that the researcher is having to conduct these interviews without being in the same space. This has implications for “reading the room,” seeing how others interact with statements, or ensuring full engagement or limited distractions.

- Confidentiality: Whenever human participants are interviewed or participate in some form of data collection, concern about confidentiality is most likely a limitation. While teachers, principals, and district leaders want to be forthcoming in the interviews and provide the data and information needed to conduct the study, there is always the concern of anonymity. With such a small sampling/unit of analysis, some participants may not feel confident with the promise of anonymity. Throughout this dissertation, pseudonyms are used regarding the district, state, and participants. All information that could lead to clear identification has been removed to ensure the privacy and anonymity of all of those involved.

Summary of Methodology

At the center of qualitative research is a phenomenon of interest to the researcher. After the phenomenon is identified, the researcher must identify a problem that must be solved by answering a question. What is important about this process is the collection of data that requires help from other participants, where we get a chance to hear their views and perceptions of this phenomenon, according to Creswell (2016). In this study, I depended primarily on the participants to share their experiences and perceptions through one-on-one interviews, giving each participant the opportunity to share their personal experiences and perceptions of the PSM Program. The participants' willingness to share their experiences, combined with my passion for capturing what they have to say, allows me the opportunity to amplify their voices to effect change.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Educator experience during school reform is a missing piece in the evaluation and research of school reform success, according to current school reform literature. The purpose of this case study was to capture the perception and experiences of a group of educators at Lincoln Elementary School, a recurring low-performing school. Within SPD, there are 87 schools, 23 of which are low performing, meaning the schools have received a performance grade of a “D or F” and a “not met expected growth” label (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020). Southeastern Public School District and Lincoln Elementary School have a unique demographic profile in part due to the rural and suburban geography and close connection to the military, with 26% of the students connected to military families. The ethnic composition of LES reflects the traditional school composition for low-performing schools: 54.6% Black, 18.2% Hispanic, 14.1% White, 10.5% two or more races, and 2.1% AAPI. Of the 373 students at LES, 99% receive free and reduced lunch, speaking to the number of families at or below the poverty level, compared to the 54% in SPD (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). It was not only my goal to amplify the voices of the participants who are working to navigate current school reform implementation in a segregated district and school but to also provide findings and recommendations to support effective school reform, provide guidance for policy makers, district and school leaders and teachers and community

stakeholders. The findings presented in this chapter reflect the stories and experiences told by the school administration and teaching staff at Lincoln Elementary School. The participants provided rich, candid, and personal illustrations of their successes and failures of the Primary School Model Reform Program. The dimensions and 12 key indicators discussed in Chapter I served as a foundation for the semi-structured interview questions, found in Appendix A. As discussed in Chapter III, the open coding strategy was used to analyze the interview data from the participants. The coding was used to construct categories within the dimensions, resulting in the information presented in Table 8.

Table 8.

Primary School Model Program Framework Categories and Themes

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment	
Theme	Description
Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment	Participants’ experiences and perspectives on the purpose, benefit, and best practice of classrooms that are conducive to high-quality instruction and learning.
Mastery of Curriculum Implementation	Experience of instructional staff members and school leadership to ensure high-quality instruction and curriculum implementation as directed within PSM.
District Instructional Support	Participants’ perception and experience of district support to implement the instructional expectations outlined in the PSM, provide impactful development opportunities, and encourage professional growth.

Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity	
Organizational Structure for Leadership Support	Participants discussed their experiences with the structure of the school district to support school leadership in effecting change in the building.
Strategic Planning and Vision	Participants' discussion on the impact of clear communication of school and district leadership's vision for school improvement, the effectiveness of structures in place to support the vision and experience of navigating the programming of PSM.
Leadership Presence and Connection	Classroom participants' experience with leadership and support during PSM implementation. Leadership participants' experience in implementing processes to monitor instructional and classroom management practices.
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity	
Creating the Right Culture	Participants' experience and perception of hiring, evaluation practices, and retention efforts that support effective school reform and foster a positive culture from the leadership and teacher perspective.
Accountability and Autonomy	Participants' discussion of autonomy in implementing the PSM reform program and the level of accountability from the school and district levels.
Professional Development	Participants' perception of professional development offerings, effectiveness, and personal level of engagement.
Dimension 5: Families and Community	
Build Trust through Engagement, Collaboration, and Communication	Participants discussed the impact of and key practices in building trust, along with strategies used to engage, collaborate, and communicate with families.

During the analysis, two grand themes continued to emerge across each dimension. This was considered extremely relevant to the research. Because this characteristic was unique to these two themes, these themes are presented and discussed

separately as grand themes. Equity and Equitable practices, the first grand theme, was identified as a key lever for school reform success. Participants discussed the need to not only understand and recognize the need for equity but to implement equitable practices by putting that understanding into action.

The second grand theme, Urgency, was discussed implicitly and explicitly throughout each interview. The participants showed a level of urgency when discussing the learning and execution of their roles, finding solutions to the issues that were occurring in the building and their communities, and of course, improving student performance. When considering experiences and perceptions of school reform, it was important to this study to identify and give space to those themes that transcended across all aspects of the framework. Table 9 provides descriptions of the grand themes as determined through data analysis. The thematic findings within each dimension are discussed in the following sections, followed by the findings of the grand themes.

Table 9.

Grand Theme Descriptions

Theme	Description
Grand Theme 1: Equity and Equitable Practices	Experiences, perspectives, discussions, and actions that centered around the idea of equity and actions or initiatives that address and foster an environment of success for LES stakeholders.
Grand Theme 2: Urgency	Experiences, perspectives, discussions, and needs that speak to the swift action taken by stakeholders of LES to address identified issues.

The conceptual framework helped to organize the themes and provide clarity and direction around the following discussions. Throughout the data analysis, there was evidence of fluidity between the codes, categories, and themes and alignment with the four dimensions. I found that some of the categories and themes could fit with multiple dimensions; however, it was important to me that I made well-defined decisions to ensure clarity with my findings and recommendations. This was particularly important as I made connections between the various perceptions through the various lens of the participant group. The findings provided in the subsequent sections address each theme within the dimensions.

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment

The focus of Dimension 1 of PSM is on supporting school leadership and teachers in providing high-quality instruction and support services. Dimension 1 has a direct connection to two key characteristics of low-performing schools: (a) Quality Assurance for Teaching and Learning, and (b) School Geography/Student Assignment. Early in the data collection, there is evidence that the participants' focus aligned with the PSM in key areas, one being the importance of a safe environment. Participants talked at length about their experience in implementing programs to support a safe environment and productive classroom management. This section will explore their experiences and perceptions of district and school leadership expectations, actions, and support; successes, failures, and personal connections to the work required to successfully implement this area of focus.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment

You have to put on lots of hats ... You have to be a sociologist, you have to be a guidance counselor, you have to be a mama and a daddy. ~ Clinton Smith, ELL Teacher

In education, the success of teachers and students comes from the strength of the relationship built between the teacher and student. During each of the interviews, before the participants discussed the scope of their job as teachers, leaders, or supporters, they all discussed their individual efforts in getting to know their students, building relationships, and creating an environment where students felt safe and ready to learn. The support provided by the district to successfully implement various programs and initiatives was a key discussion point as well.

Helping Students in Crisis

At the start of his interview, Ray Martin, principal, immediately discussed his journey with social-emotional learning at Lincoln. He shared the difficulties faced with student behaviors that created an environment of frustration within the staff. He remembers hearing from staff members that he was “too nice” and not doing enough to “crack down on the crime.” As a result, Ray decided to handle the behaviors through suspensions, a conventional response to undesired behaviors and actions. Instead of an increase of improvement in behaviors, Ray noticed an exponential increase in suspensions, from 50 to 150 within a year, a 300% increase. He remembers saying to himself, “Oh my God, wait a minute!” He was forced to stop and reflect on his leadership practice, asking himself,

What happens before they come to us? That is when I began to really understand children in crisis, that there are a lot of factors that create instability for these children, and it manifests in behaviors that we deem are disruptive and aggressive.

As the school leader, he felt it was his job to delve into the data to provide a space for conversations to find a different solution. Ray and the assistant principal, Tine Ward, began working together to identify the root cause of the behaviors to decrease the suspensions and create a lasting positive environment. Tine firmly believes that the best place for students is in school because when “they are not in school; they are not learning,” impacting the overall success of school reform. During their conversations, the primary action for change was adjusting the staff’s reaction to the student behaviors. Ray became committed to his focus of “equipping our staff in how to make relationships with these kids, how to help them have a safe place ... while teaching.” Ray took advantage of the professional development provided by the district that was focused on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and identified that as the first step to finding a solution. Ebony Simon, the instructional coach, discussed that there were teachers that were behind in pacing and lost instruction; however, instructional quality was not the sole issue. Ebony candidly stated that lost instruction was due to behaviors, “we can gloss that over as much as we want to make it sound rosy, but when there’s behavior issues ... it slows down learning,” identifying a root cause to low academic performance.

In the 2019-2020 school year, Ray began facilitating school-wide lessons in the morning with a social and emotional skill of the day. The teaching staff participants all mentioned the efforts and consistency of school leadership in taking the charge to truly

address the behaviors. Ben Ward, the social worker, and Tony Wilson and Vonda Gill, classroom teachers, all discussed the impact that the training has had on their classroom culture practices, regardless of their experience. Vonda, a novice teacher, appreciated the strategies to add to her ‘teaching toolbelt.’ In the interview, Tony, a veteran teacher, argued, “Yes, you can write a paragraph and add and subtract up to 20, but do you know how to socialize? Do you know how to work out problems with your friends and communicate your feelings [appropriately]?” Appreciative of the reminder, autonomy, and flexibility given by Ray and Tina, Tony implemented play into his Kindergarten classroom to help his students implement some of the strategies and coping skills learned in the morning lessons.

Jean and Vonda expressed feeling empowered to focus on what their students needed as people and not just focus on the instructional standard or how much they know. They felt comfortable asking, “How are you doing emotionally? How is this going to affect how we learn?” and taking the time to focus on that during the class if necessary. In school reform, especially when required by the state or federal departments, the primary focus is on instruction, teaching strategies, staff effectiveness; however, after interviews with the participant, it was clear that the culture of LES is focused on building good people and helping teachers with strategies to manage the classroom and create safe spaces.

Rose Brown and Benjamin Ward continue to be instrumental in supporting students and staff in this social/emotional learning as the Behavior Support Coach and Social Worker in the building. Rose occupies a new position created to address student

behaviors and provide staff support. Throughout the interviews, there was a recurring expression of excitement among the participants about receiving the Behavior Support Coach to help reach the PSM goals through behavior management strategies. Rose was most excited and proud of the mentoring groups she is facilitating, allowing space for conversations with students of various ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. She was adamant that “mentoring was needed to give kids ... a source of positivity.” Rose felt this was important in building strong relationships with students and staff, “while respecting the scope of their roles, as support and not administration,” who sometimes must address behaviors through consequences. Both Rose and Ben have worked to support and train staff on equity and relationship-building strategies. Ben has worked to increase the awareness of staff, helping them to understand that the students may not share the same upbringing and childhood as you, and driving home the need for sensitivity. Rose agrees with that focus; however, she has warned the staff through training and conversation that sympathy and without boundaries and moderation can lead to pity, and “when you pity that student, you cripple that student.” Pity in the classroom can be a direct contradiction to instructional excellence and high expectations.

Building Relationships with Students in Crisis

The educational concept that building relationships and addressing trauma is the first step to school reform in high poverty was a shared discussion point among multiple participants. Jean Peak, a fourth-grade teacher, shared,

Growing up as a child, I never knew my teachers. I never knew who they were, I just knew that they were my teacher, and I needed to be in their class. It builds a

positive relationship with them when they know that I'm a real person, I'm not just here to just be in your face. I'm here because I love you and I want to support you and if nobody else believes in you, I'm the one that believes in you.

Tine passionately explained and reminded us,

When I had opportunities with children, I pull them in, and I get to know the child. I earn their respect. I've learned when children love you, you can get them to do anything. Anything ... all they want to know is [that] somebody cares.

Clinton describes caring as being able to “celebrate students and give them tough love,” saying ‘Look, I do this because I care or I love you, and if I didn't love you, I wouldn't tell you.’ Understanding that there are some instances where students need tough love and real-life consequences, Ray worked with his behavior coach and social worker to implement the Restorative Circle practice, another action step to address trauma and behaviors while encouraging healthy conversations between students and staff. Benjamin stated that as the reform process continues, one aspect to improve upon would be his presence in the classrooms. He would “love to be in the classes teaching students how to control their emotions ... and reset.” Allowing more of an opportunity for him to build relationships with the students and teachers, modeling empathy, compassion, and other necessary skills.

Through the strategic planning of the administration team, the staff at LES is provided with proactive strategies, such as the school-wide morning lessons, training from leadership, social worker and a behavior support coach, mentoring/small group support, and classroom routines and procedures. The new implementation of follow-up

strategies such as the restorative circle also supports Ray’s focus on making social and emotional learning “a part of everything that we do,” allowing for the children to become masters at learning and the adults to become masters at teaching.

Mastery of Curriculum Implementation

Failure is not something we want, because our product is children ... human lives.
~ Ebony Simon, Instructional Coach

Along with the love and care for the students they work with every day, the participants are passionate about their role as instructional masters in their content areas. A key aspect of school reform, as mentioned in the Literature Review, is the implementation of research-based curricular programs to guide states, districts, and schools on a steep trajectory toward success. The purpose of organizational-wide curricular programming is to support novice teachers in executing the instruction at a mastery level, support districts and school leadership in monitoring the instruction, and creating instructional calibration across schools and districts. In this section, participants share their experiences on their journey to creating and reaching the status of a master teacher, all while navigating curriculum implementation during school reform.

Autonomy and Differentiation

In Dimension 1, LES leadership, teachers, and staff were tasked with facilitating and implementing units of instruction that were aligned to standards while meeting goals and objectives of all students including, Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG), English Language Learners (ELL), Students with Disabilities (SWD) through their

Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In this study, SPD required all schools to use scripted literacy and math curricula. The use of the various curricula allowed novice teachers such as Jean and Vonda to master their delivery and use of instructional strategies without having to write entire lessons from beginning to end. Both were appreciative of the starting point as they tackled their first 2 years of teaching during a global pandemic. Vonda enjoyed the opportunity to adjust something that was already created, playing to her strengths in certain content areas while supporting her in areas she was weaker. Vonda identifies ELA (English/Language Arts) as her strength and admits that in math, “I definitely need to figure out how to get it across to my students better.” The scripted curriculum helps her focus on the execution. Ebony agrees with the benefit of the scripted curriculum and how it allows her to spend more time supporting teachers with the execution of both reading and math curriculum, data analysis, and adjusting instructional practices to address the data.

Early in the roll-out of the curriculum, she learned early from teacher feedback that she needed to “think realistically and allow space for teachers to integrate their own thoughts, expertise, and experiences” to maximize instructional practice and teacher engagement. For example, she found that teachers were frustrated with the pacing of the curriculum and the ability to ‘get it all in.’ This was further exacerbated on days district leadership would be in the building to conduct what they call Instructional Rounds (iRounds) to evaluate their execution and pacing. Ebony specifically recalls discussions within a fifth-grade PLC, where teachers were trying to decide how to keep the most impactful pieces of the unit that addressed the standards but also made sense for student

needs, engagement, and relevance. The teachers did not want to sacrifice the “deep, rich, wonderful conversations” for the sake of the calendar, according to Ebony, but they also knew the expectation as presented by the district. Ebony took advantage of this opportunity to create space for creativity and collaboration to delve even more into the curriculum and standards to find a solution, again taking them one step closer to becoming a master teacher. Ebony found that teachers, particularly those with novice status, showed weakness in planning and understanding instructional standards. Having a high number of inexperienced teachers is characteristic of low-performing schools due to high turnover. At LES, a large portion of the staff fit in two categories: recent graduates new to the profession or alternate route teachers who did not go through a teacher education program. She realized that the teachers were frustrated with student performance, so “I focused on trying to do some standard dives ... to figure out exactly what the standard said,” helping them to make the connection between the curriculum and best instructional practice. Having space and opportunity to build a strong instructional foundation was important to all the participants, regardless of experience.

At the time of the interview, this was only the second year of the curriculum implementation, so participants were still learning and understanding the instructional cycle, pacing, and rigor of the program. Tony, a veteran Kindergarten teacher, struggles with this aspect of school reform. During the interview, Tony recalled conversations with the district regarding the choice of curriculum and the impact that curricular changes have on students and teachers. Tony’s primary concern was the change of curriculum choice and the window of time given to work with the previous program. As a veteran

teacher who has been in the same state for 13 years, Tony states that changing curriculum programs is nothing new. He wishes that SED would “take more time with programs and really vet them.” He shared that there were times where he would have to give a disclaimer during conferences with parents, “I found myself saying, ‘It’s year two, and I’m still learning the program, bear with me,’ making me feel incompetent.” This, in Tony’s opinion, made it harder to become the total master of your craft even as a veteran teacher of 13 years.

Curriculum Beyond the General Classroom

Mastery of curriculum implementation reaches beyond the general classroom but also to student support services, such as the Academically Gifted, Special Education, Instructional Intervention, and English Language Learner Programs. Clinton, the participant with the most teaching experience and areas of licensure, challenges instructional specialists, specifically his ELL colleagues, to strive for mastery in multiple content areas. Clinton felt licensure in various content areas supports the level of urgency needed to move students, asserting:

It’s really hard for you not to be a content teacher and be a language teacher. Technically speaking, you should be a master at every content area because you’re going to have to be able to teach those kids how to speak, listen, read, and write in those content areas. In order for me to be able to do that, I’m going to have to understand the meaning of a context clue. What types of context clues there are—that’s content. Now, I’m going to add in my ESL component.

Furthermore, Clinton is hoping that curriculum specialists and the ELL District Department can work together to align curriculums better, an area of growth for the

district. Again, this issue is further intensified when curricular choices change after only a short period of time, as pointed out by Tony, not allowing EC, ELL, or AIG departments to support their teachers in aligning the curriculum with their specially designed instructional practices. When curricula, pacing, and strategies are aligned, ELL and General Education teachers can truly implement co-teaching, supporting all low-performing students, not just ELL students.

Across the board, as teachers and school leadership discussed mastery of curriculum and teaching, there was one common area of growth and focus—how do we differentiate the curriculum to reach the higher-performing students? There is a misconception that there are little to no on or above grade level students at low-performing schools. Ray shared that while many of the students have large instructional deficits, about 20% of their student population is on or above grade level. During school reform, there is a focus, and with good reason, on students who are performing below grade level, especially when 80% of your students are struggling to meet grade-level standards. Teaching with rigor in mind will, of course, create growth for below-grade-level students but will also grow students who are on or above grade level. Tony admits that as teachers in low-performing schools, “we are used to and trained to keep pouring into [struggling students]”; however, there are missed opportunities to support the other students ensuring that they continue to grow and avoid stagnant academic performance or even worse- falling behind. Tony found that in his classroom, there were times where he felt that his above-grade-level students were hitting a ceiling, and there was a need for

professional development and conversations around rigor and integrating it into a scripted curriculum.

District Support and Initiatives

I feel like we're at a point ... when we ask for things, it does not go up into the ether and never come back down anymore. I'm actually getting some of the support that we were asking for. ~Ray Martin, Principal

As the participants continued to share their experiences regarding their classroom performance and quality of instruction, the final theme for Dimension 1 centered on district support and initiatives. Both school leadership and teaching participants shared successes, areas of growth, and current action to address those areas. The support from the district started with a focus on developing the leadership. Building the capacity of the leaders to support teachers is key to the sustainable success of a school in reform, and LES was no different.

Developing the Leadership to Lead

Ray, Tine, and Ebony all discussed the strategic district-wide professional development plan that was created implemented over the last 2 years. Tine noted the level of district support provided to the instructional coaches stating, "They do a wonderful job training the instructional coaches, and the instructional coaches come back and train the teachers." Although instructional coaches received the heavier training, school leadership also received more general training. Tine identified the value of that practice, ensuring they are not "left in the dark about the [curriculum] implementations and can monitor effectively," a key aspect of Dimension 2.

With the improvement and intentionality of the district-level training, Ebony felt that she had the opportunity to genuinely impact the professional growth of teachers at LES beyond executing the scripted curriculum. Soon after starting her position, Ebony noticed the lack of direction and intentionality in the PLC meetings with teachers, with most of the time focused on lesson plan completion and questions. While questions and collaborative planning are necessary to achieve instructional excellence, she felt that to truly align with PSM expectations and encourage growth, she needed to create a structure that incorporated intentional professional development that supported teacher needs, district expectations, and effective supervision of curriculum implementation. After some time of observation, she began having themed weeks of professional development each month: data, literacy, district initiatives, and feedback from learning walks, also referred to as iRounds in SED. As a result, she and the teachers noticed an improvement in their confidence and professional practice. In a vulnerable moment, Jean described her progress due to the support received from SED and Ebony,

It was a struggle, I used to cry every single day because it was just so, it was just so much ... too much for me. Now it's way easier because they have the things that I need. I just feel happy, I feel like I understand. I know what I'm supposed to be doing.

As a new administrator, Tine was aware that she would need support, specifically in instructional leadership and strategies for managing her role responsibilities and time. Although she was a strong teacher, creating and supporting master teachers is a different skill set. After training in the implementation of the new curriculum, SED began to

implement initiatives to support school leadership and instructional coaches in monitoring the curriculum.

Walking Together

This year, the district began to think intentionally about the Instructional Round (iRound) initiative implemented in the 2019-2020 school year. School leadership and coaches were expected to do 30 minutes of iRounds daily, a 10-minute walkthrough or “snapshot” of a classroom, and timely feedback to the teacher. At least once a month, district-level leadership would come and join the iRound process. Ray, Tine, and Ebony found these extremely helpful for multiple reasons. Ray and Tine felt there was a high level of accountability to complete iRounds to ensure supervision of implementation was a daily priority. Teacher participants also stated that this held them accountable to curriculum implementation with fidelity. Secondly, the on-site coaching school leadership received from the district during the monthly iRound visits helped to make their learning tangible and clear, giving immediate context to feedback while identifying areas of focus on a broader level. iRounds provided time for teachers to receive personalized feedback directly from the district. Tony found this time most beneficial because it allowed for him to “ask questions and receive feedback” directly from the district. While this primarily helped teachers, this also afforded leadership the opportunity to see real-time coaching. Finally, LES appreciated the district iRounds, not for the instructional feedback, but for the opportunity to build relationships with district leadership, providing a safe space for school leadership to ask questions. With regular meetings, district leaders were able to see the hard work and growth over time.

Ebony then took this experience and used it to develop teachers at LES through what she called “learning walks.” The learning walks were used to support teachers who showed areas of growth in any area: planning, classroom management, instructional strategies, etc., while also identifying and growing teacher leaders and master classrooms. This sometimes took the place of PLC, where Ebony was able to provide real-time feedback and coaching to one teacher or a grade level. Teaching participants stated that this strategy helped to not only hone their craft as teachers but also to build relationships with one another and see their colleagues in action while celebrating one another’s strengths.

Dimension 1 Summary

Dimension 1 addresses many areas of focus for the staff to navigate. While the focus is on Instructional Excellence and Alignment, they are tasked with addressing classroom management, instructional planning, and social/emotional learning during this reform. As the participants discussed their experience with PSM and particularly this dimension, Building Relationships with Students and Addressing Trauma was an overwhelmingly common theme in their responses. In a school such as LES, students dealing with crisis or trauma is a priority group in their student population; therefore, the non-academic issues must be addressed before students can begin to truly learn. While the participants share that the need can be overwhelming, they knew this was a piece of the puzzle when working with this school community and requires commitment from everyone.

Ensuring students are receiving high-quality instruction each day was a priority for all participants. While the teachers expressed frustration with the change in curriculum and other reform programs, they appreciated the support and autonomy granted to them by school leadership. Coupled with the intentional and consistent professional development and training from the district through curriculum training, iRounds, Learning Walks, and instructional feedback, teachers feel that they are set up for success if they are given sufficient time to grapple with the curriculum.

Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity

An effective school leadership team is a key lever in successful school reform implementation, as outlined in Chapter II. Current school reform models address leadership in school reform through replacement or intense professional development. Dimension 2 centers on the actions of leadership, both district and school level, in effecting change within the building. Four themes emerged during the interviews with the participants: Organizational Structure for Support, Strategic Planning and Vision, Leadership Presence and Connection, and Teacher Leadership and Collaboration.

Organizational Structure for Leadership Support

Dr. Petey [SED Superintendent] changed and reorganized some things ... it's really helped the circulation, the life force. ~Ray Martin, Principal

At the time of the interview, Ray was entering his sixth year at LES and his second year implementing PSM. For additional context, Dr. Petey was entering his second year of superintendency at SED. Ray was able to speak firsthand about his

experience with district organizational support for leadership prior to and during PSM implementation. Leading a low-performing school is a daunting task for any principal, regardless of experience. Ray was very transparent in sharing that his first two years were not great and that he continues to need support to lead LES but that he has seen improvement in his leadership skills and district support. During the interview, Ray shared SED started a school leadership mentor initiative for principals while also providing principals of low-performing schools with coaches. Ray saw the need for this shift in support as he discussed the issues with receiving honest and genuine coaching from his direct supervisor, who also evaluates his performance. There was a natural barrier between him and his supervisor when discussing needs, failures, and support:

They're also the person that does my evaluation. It's been hard to be honest with you and just lay my whole soul bare. I liked him. He liked me, but it's kind of hard to hold both of those positions.

With the implementation of leadership coaches, he now has “that” person. He describes his leadership coach as “consistent, firm, knowledgeable, and supportive.” This initiative highlights the district’s focus and commitment to building leadership capacity and providing intentional development opportunities. In Ray’s experience, his support has improved and been helpful. “Nobody’s perfect, but I can feel the love, and I can see it, I can touch something ... tangible support.” His coach and mentor have helped him to become a better manager of time and responsibilities, as well as a stronger instructional leader and model for Tine, who is in her second year as a school administrator. With

these initiatives in place, Ray feels that he can lead LES with a clearer vision and stronger plan, a critical piece to the foundation of effecting change.

Strategic Planning and Vision

To have leadership, especially at a low-performing school, and feel like they want to be there, it keeps you motivated ... it's hard to get behind someone who doesn't trust their own process. ~ Vonda Gill, Fifth-Grade Teacher

An organization's success relies on the clarity of the leader's vision, the strength of their planning, and the ability to communicate. PSM has helped to focus their attention through the 12 key indicators. Ray feels he has improved in balancing responsibilities, focusing on the key indicators to clearly communicate needs, goals, and purpose to his staff. Ray described the key indicators as helping him to discern between important and urgent, admitting that in the previous year, "I tried to do all the important stuff, and then the urgent things burned me, because that fire got too hot."

Focus and Clarity

The 12 key indicators helped Ray to identify the four areas of focus for LES: Literacy, Exceptional Children Reform (Special Education), Social/Emotional Learning, and most recently, Rigor. Jean states that it is easy to follow Ray and understand where he wants to go and how he wants to get there. She says, "He has always been transparent, but now he is clearer." She appreciates that he has always made staff members feel valued by allowing space for them to be a part of key conversations regarding data, curriculum, or community needs. She has always valued that from a leader because the school needs clear communication so that "we know what to do, to better ourselves ...

and for our students.” While the PSM program has made it easier to create and implement a vision, it does come with some concerns.

Participants agree that the PSM Program is a better improvement process because it is easier to identify strategies and follow through action steps; however, the 12 indicators continue to be a lot to manage simultaneously. Ray and his team still feeling overwhelmed, saying,

I don't like the hypocrisy ... the contradiction and messaging that we get, because they'll [PSM] tell you, and [district] leadership, 'You can't change it all, focus on one thing.' I can't. I've got like 12, 14 things here that I'm supposed to be focusing on. And for my first three years, I tried to do it all, and I failed completely.

Ebony does agree that each of the indicators aligns with what should be happening in our schools each day and that she is able to see the intentionality in the vision and plan. She is concerned that because there are so many aspects to the plan, that there can sometimes be a lack of depth to the implementation.

Communicating his vision clearly and with intention was important for Ray to rebuild and strengthen the relationship and connection with his staff. This was particularly important since LES had four principals in the three years prior to this arrival, causing fragility and mistrust between administration and staff.

Leadership Presence and Connection

Being present helped, as intimidating as it is ... I felt connected to them, like they cared about our school. ~ Ebony Simon

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed interest in the strength and genuineness of the relationship between administration and staff and leadership presence within the school. The teachers were adamant that support did not solely refer to curriculum or instructional practices. Most participants found they were most successful and positively engaged when the administration provided space for honest dialogue, were present during their time of need, and most importantly, provided feedback that strengthened their professional practice.

Creating Space for Support

The first step to addressing leadership presence and connection centered on creating an environment where they could monitor instruction effectively, support teachers, and increase visibility around the building. As the focus continued to strengthen on instruction, Ray, Tine, and Ebony were able to come together as the primary school instructional support team to create an effective plan. Ebony's previous experience as a teacher was the foundation of her approach to her role as Instructional Coach and feedback that she provided to the administrative team. She remembered how it felt to receive impersonal feedback that was focused on the teachers' weaknesses without regard for their strengths or what they did right during that time. "If your leadership is snuffing out teachers, then you're not creating growth ... or won't see anything happen." It was important to Ebony that the role of Instructional Coach was seen solely as a person of support for both teachers and the administration, not as an administrative team member. Ebony was careful to "respect that boundary of I am more of a peer to the teachers, and trying not to overstep the administration role," while the administration team and district

were mindful to ensure that Ebony was not bogged down with non-related roles that kept her from supporting instruction and teachers as needed. The effectiveness of the organizational structure of the district to support the Instructional Coach was another key discussion point. As mentioned in Dimension 1, the decision to decrease instructional support by 50% has impacted the level of support that Ebony is able to provide the teachers. All the classroom teacher participants stated that they hope in the coming year, LES can possibly have two instructional coaches again, as Ebony's input and support were valuable but stretched thin, impacting her visibility and presence.

Teachers most appreciated the time that Ebony took with them to not only answer questions and complete standard dives, but she would also teach model lessons or co-teach with teachers to help them see the feedback in action. Jean, a residency teacher currently working on obtaining her license, has shown difficulty managing the new curriculum and grade-level content, to the point that she was crying every day and working late at night "to make sure that she got it right." She specifically recalled receiving the model lesson support and how that was a turning point for her. Ebony's regular presence in the classrooms was a big connection opportunity. Teachers were open to her feedback during the collaborative meetings, sometimes requesting follow-up conversations, highlighting the type of relationship that teachers had with instructional leadership. They do not view model lessons and observations as punitive but as an opportunity for development. Of course, Ebony states that not all teachers are on board with this level of support, "I can't force every teacher to be on board for everything, but I can support the ones who are eager to grow."

Creating Space for Transparency

After the first 3 years of his principalship, Ray saw the need and value of transparency and communication in creating a strong and positive culture within the school. At the start of this reform, he began to facilitate a more transparent open-door policy where teachers felt empowered to share concerns, needs, and feedback. Tony, one of the senior teacher participants, discussed openly how his connection with leadership changed over the last year. Tony was able to say, “Mr. Martin, can I have a moment ... this is not working” without fear of retribution, but instead, a listening ear that at times yielded a change in instructional flexibility, social-emotional-themed lessons or programs, and even outside professional development opportunities.

This servant leadership approach helped teacher leaders emerge throughout the building, which was necessary with only one assistant principal and one instructional coach. Leadership connection also increased as Ray improved on his practice of distributive leadership. Ray, along with the other participants, recognize that teacher leadership and collaboration is necessary to stay focused on the mission and ensure the various areas of need were addressed. Ray acknowledged that with the number of indicators, if LES had a chance of meeting the expectations, “we’re going to have to divide the wealth and provide opportunities for teacher leaders to step up.”

Creating an organizational structure to create teacher leaders was a priority for Ray and Tine. When asked how they made it happen, Ray implemented his own version of ‘opportunity culture.’

You kind of reorganize the people in your building so that you do have teacher leaders who have the time and opportunity to support some of those other teachers who need help in a specific area of instruction so that everyone is giving quality learning experiences for our students.

Tine did this through the beginning teacher program, and Ray did so by creating a teacher leader team to provide insight and support to the school vision. Overall, participants share that they have seen a shift in the culture over the past year of implementation has made an impact on hiring practices, professional development, and discussions around the autonomy of teacher practice.

Dimension 2 Summary

For LES, improving leadership capacity started at the district level with a shift in organizational structure and support that provided improved support for Ray. Within the building, Ray, Tine, and Ebony implemented various strategies to build strong connections and support teacher leadership. Throughout the interviews, it became evident that at LES, leadership did not start and end with Ray, Tine, and Ebony. The administration has built a culture where leaders are grown by celebrating and leveraging their diverse strengths to foster success throughout the building.

Dimension 3: Professional Capacity

School reform success is founded on more than the leadership capacity of the principal or district. The level of abilities, skills, and expertise of all the educators implementing the reform is key to success and sustainability. Throughout the interviews, each participant discussed the importance of building strong professional relationships within their teams, participating in intentional and effective professional development,

and creating a balance of autonomy and accountability within the environment. These educational concepts help to improve teacher skill and practice, while participants also noted the impact that hiring, and retention practices had on their professional experience.

Filling the Bus: Creating the Right Culture

I can see where we have let some good ones slip through the cracks because the focus was on experience versus the right fit. ~Tony Wilson

The PSM Program requires the school to consider and implement best practices for recruiting, evaluating, rewarding, retaining, and replacing staff. Lincoln Elementary School continues to navigate high turnover among teaching staff, something that Ray considers to be a pro and a con in the beginning stages of school reform. The last two years found Ray still working with a mixed staff of inherited teachers and teachers he had the opportunity he hired. At this point in his tenure, Ray had a better understanding of what he needed to do and what kind of people he needed on the bus.

Creating a Staffing Process

During the hiring process, Ray began to communicate his vision, telling them, “This is who I am, this is what I do, and this is what we’re planning.” When creating the right culture, it was not as important to Ray that everyone got along or that everyone liked him, but that people understood the vision and were traveling in the same direction. His first step, getting rid of toxic people in the building. Removing the toxicity is not an easy task and is not always done right away. Tony could see that Ray attempted to improve the culture but was forced to hold on to the toxic people because “they’re a bus

driver, and bus drivers can be hard to find or replace”; participants recognized that practicality is still a necessary part of school operation. Ray instead focused on having honest dialogue with staff members regularly, “finding who my allies were in the building, who were like-minded.” Activating the like-minded allies allowed for staff members to be the “mouthpieces for different needs,” a better use of time. Of course, change in leadership and shift in expectations creates turnover and “opportunities to be able to hire and start putting people, on the bus in the right seats,” according to Ray.

Finding (and Creating) the Experts

Tony, the participant with the most years of experience, shared that creating the right culture starts with finding and value everyone’s strengths and weaknesses. “Everybody’s got to be an expert at something. Because if you got pay-in to the school, you won’t leave.” Finding staff that understands the work and wants to serve the students of LES is the goal of the school interviewing practice. Ray has worked to find a balance between urgency and patience when he is looking to fill vacant positions, vowing that “the position will remain vacant until I can find somebody who will be what we need,” encouraging the mindset of finding the right person, who will push the work forward and not just a warm body, who can derail the work if not the right fit. Participants believed that finding the right people and creating strong teams promotes positive accountability and autonomy within the building, two important aspects of school reform work and building professional capacity.

Accountability and Autonomy

I definitely feel like they have like their standards, they'll communicate that to us. They let us, take our wings and do what we need to do ... they have a lot of faith and trust in us. ~ Vonda Gill

Accountability and Autonomy continued to emerge together throughout the interviews and particularly within Dimension 3, as participants tried to reconcile the balance of working inside the box of school reform while sharing their talents, skills, and abilities. LES created a culture of accountability through transparency and consistency. School administration shared district and schoolwide data regularly, with school staff discussing plans to address the data, a strategy that Jean appreciated. Teacher participants saw an increase in accountability because you could see how your grade level impacted the school and how teacher actions played into the overall success of the school reform. Vertical collaboration improved as well with increased transparency from leadership. Ebony recalls a vertical math meeting where fifth-grade teachers were sharing the deficit that students were showing in a particular standard. After careful standard analysis and conversations, fourth-grade teachers found that they did not address the standard as needed, saying, "We are sorry, we did not do that right last year." Jean, also discussing the story, said, "after that conversation, our instructional practice shifted immediately." Ebony remembered that as a genuine and organic moment of accountability and forgiveness.

Autonomy was a common theme among teacher participants, specifically with instructional practice and resources. One interesting finding comes from Vonda, a novice

teacher in her first year of teaching. She states that for her to act on autonomy, she first needed coaching on her confidence, “They’ve been trying to coach on my confidence. I’ll be honest, I think that’s just a big thing ... being comfortable enough to do things on my own.” Tony also acknowledged that autonomy is a big factor in teacher success.

Administrator flexibility ... is a big factor. Because lots of times we feel like we’re shoved into a mold and that is all that we can do. And that’s the only way that they’re going to be successful. And that really hurts and stunts us. Mr. Martin entrusts us with the responsibility of moving and pushing those kids.

Trust of teacher’s professional judgment is a key factor in education and a common topic between teachers and leadership. Ebony, a liaison between both, believes that autonomy can only occur when balanced with accountability. She likens it to respect- something that must be earned, stating that “autonomy can only be earned when one is accountable to the expectations.”

Professional Development

The final theme that emerged within Dimension 3 was professional development. The teachers discussed their experiences and perceptions of how LES and SED met the objective outlined in the reform framework. PSM states that districts and schools should look at data to make decisions on PD needs. Jean and other participants found that over the last couple of years, and particularly this past year, SED made positive changes in providing professional development to build their capacities as instructional leaders in their classrooms and schools, specifically beginning teachers. Vonda spoke about the care and support she has received from SED beyond the conventional meetings and mentors.

SED created a program, PALS, where a small group of new teachers is assigned a retired teacher.

The young ladies, they're assigned a female PALS mentor, and then the men, they're assigned a male PALS mentor, which I think is a really great thing. Like I know we talk about like inclusion and stuff like that, but sometimes we just need that differentiation.

The benefit of this partnership is that the PAL mentor is not confined to school schedules or their own professional needs. Vonda enjoyed having this supporter with a level of flexibility. Her PAL would pop into her classrooms on a regular basis to give her constructive feedback. Aligning to Ray's earlier statement in Dimension 2, having a coach or support that is not connected to your evaluation makes a difference, Vonda felt the same way.

Dimension 3 Summary

Building professional capacity is an important focus for Ray and his team at LES. The participants identified three areas that had an impact on professional capacity: creating a strong culture through effective hiring practices, creating an environment with a balance of accountability and autonomy, and effective change to professional development. During this school reform, participants discussed and identified areas of struggle, such as teacher recruitment and retention, while also sharing the various strategies employed to navigate the difficulties. Creating and maintain a staff environment that is positive and committed to the LES community is vital to the success of the entire school reform program.

Dimension 5: Families and Community

Connecting to the school community is the key to success for any school; however, in school reform, it is critical to the sustainability of the success. Dimension 5 rounds out the low-performing framework for PSM, with a focus on families and community. The focus of the indicator is the communication between home and school to support student learning. All participants talked about the importance of parental involvement, building the foundation of trust, as well as strategies used to engage, collaborate, and communicate to strengthen the community.

Build Trust: Engagement, Communication, and Collaboration

I always make it my business to communicate with the parents, I just, I want them to know that I'm here for them just as much as I'm here for their child. ~ Jean Peak

During the interviews, the participants talked at length and passionately about their experiences in building trusting and productive relationships with the LES parents and community. They shared their success stories as well as lessons learned from failures. Ray was committed to building a strong connection between home and school and communicated that vision to the staff regularly. Vonda, a first-year teacher, stated that Ray and Tine made it a point to keep “reminding us about how to address parents ... if one avenue doesn't work, definitely try the other. If that avenue doesn't work, try another, if that avenue doesn't work, try another, and to never give up.” Ray stated that his goal was not only to have open lines of communication but to help parents engage in the education of their child through collaborative conversations, any way possible. Vonda

acknowledged that as new teachers, their constant reminders really highlighted the importance of parent relationships and their commitment to the mission.

A major focus for LES was to create an environment in which parents felt comfortable. Ebony stated that parents felt intimidated and “just don’t want to come to the school,” with Tony further explaining that some parents and families have had “bad experiences with schools. They’re not trusting of the educational process.” Ray found that after he removed those barriers, both literally and figuratively, there was space to build that trust, acknowledging and reminding staff that parents are who they are, and they bring their life experiences to the table every time. He learned, with one of his toughest parents, that he had to “hear her heart, respect her, see where her needs were, and then meet the need.” He remembers that this approach allowed him to build that relationship with his most difficult parent and, in turn, had a positive impact on her child’s academic progress over the course of the year. Parent-teacher conferences and events within the community became a norm for the staff at LES. Ray, Jean, and Clinton all recalled making trips to connect with parents. Jean felt that it was necessary to remind parents that “I’m here, I’m not behind this computer ... or this app that we’re using.” While participants and staff at LES employed strategies to make them more accessible to parents, Ben also pointed out there was a need to equip parents with skills and information to adequately support their students, saying, “I don’t know that our parents know how to effectively communicate,” leading to the creation of Parent University.

Parent University was an initiative Ray started to help parents learn about the educational process and instructional strategies and improve on technical skills to help

themselves and their students. Jean expressed a small sense of disappointment, as many of the parents did not always take advantage of these opportunities. Jean, however, had a sparkle of hope in that the parents who do attend and walk away with that information can share it with others.

Dimension 5 Summary

Ray, Clinton, and Tony speak lovingly about the Lincoln community, the uniqueness of who they are, and the needs they have, starting with Tony admitting that “Lincoln Elementary and the families really have a special place with me.” Clinton explains that the geographical and political changes that have taken place in the community have had an impact on the community and the needs over the recent years. The gentrification, change in community lines, and transiency has shifted how LES has responded to the needs of the students and parents. Ray admits that

It took a lot for me to grow to understand what this community really needed, so while I’m learning to be a principal, in one sense, I’m learning to be the principal of Lincoln Elementary in another sense. Love the people, but it was rough.

As the participants described their efforts to improve on the engagement, collaboration, and communication with their school community, they continue to be motivated by the potential of success and growth of their students. These revelations and experiences have driven Ray and the LES staff to think about equity and what LES students, parents, and staff need to be successful.

Strategic planning, effective implementation and follow-through, focused analysis, and critical reflection are all important parts of change management. Effective

school reform embodies each of these areas, requiring all participants to be committed to the work. The dimensions and sub-dimensions present the framework of the reform model, focusing on all aspects of schooling: instruction, leadership, development, and community engagement. A vital aspect of the reflection and analysis is noted through the feelings and thoughts of the educators' hard work each day at Lincoln Elementary School.

Summary of Dimensions

The use of the Primary School Model Program as the conceptual framework for this study aligns with the idea that reform models and program planning are essential to setting the foundation for a strong school reform implementation. Using the dimensions to categorize the perceptions and experiences of the participants helped to validate their feelings and thoughts on the value of their work. Even with solid groundwork, the practitioners need support to do the work. Through further analysis, two themes continued to emerge in each dimension through responses from the participants, Equity and Equitable Practices and Urgency, labeled as Grand Themes. The following sections will discuss the thoughts and feelings of the reform participants in both areas, starting with Equity and Equitable Practices.

Grand Theme 1: Equity and Equitable Practices

Through this process I've learned we just have to do different. Our school cannot look like a traditional school because we've been playing that game, and it doesn't work. ~ Ray Martin, Principal

In school reform, equity is an important concept that drives decisions of the leadership to address the magnitude of needs within the school and student population. Throughout the interviews, thoughts on equity and equitable practices emerged across all areas of the framework, as the need for equitable practices applied to more student needs and academic gaps. The participants talked at length about the impact of equitable practices on their professional practice and resources within the building. While student growth and academic performance are important and vital measurements for reform success, participants stated that having the resources and support that mirror student needs is important. This theme is supported by four key areas: Community Access, Capital and Human Resources, Instructional Practices, and Professional Development.

Community Access

The participants spoke passionately about meeting community needs and improving community access to educational resources. LES serves a high minority, high poverty community. Clinton celebrates the leadership for their awareness and action regarding the Latino and non-English speaking population within the student body. A small but impactful equitable practice LES began to implement addressed language needs through written and verbal accommodations. Ebony stated that “with the influx of Spanish speakers in the school community, we made a family handbook. Ray reached out for the district to request translators to help translate notes and communication going home.” LES also facilitated parent nights in multiple languages along with the translation of all written communication, allowing for parents to be active and collaborative participants in their children’s education. Ebony shared that as a result, they found more

parents came to the building and asked more questions. The participants felt the parents understood what was happening at the school level and could also ask questions in their native language to ensure concerns were not lost in translation, and all parents were able to help their children, addressing a major focus of Dimension 5. Clinton believed these actions made a strong statement to the community about how LES values “their culture and their identity.”

Capital Resources

All participants discussed the importance of accessibility to quality facilities and the appropriate human resources to support a high-quality instructional environment. The participants, particularly the teaching and support staff, expressed a desire for improvement with the physical school environment to support job execution and student engagement. Tony came to LES as a veteran teacher with years of experience in various districts around the state. When he started at LES, he noticed that “LES had the feeling of being forgotten about, you can tell the furniture was 20-30 years old and sent over from other schools that were closed or renovated.” He remembers the conversations with his colleagues and being overwhelmed with the amount of time and attention his space required, in addition to his instructional practice.

While this seems small, Tony experienced for himself the increased excitement and motivation from students because of their environments. Tony recognizes that improvement in capital resources is not a silver bullet, stating,

Our work, it’s going to be the same, but if you have the resources, the work is easier ... more exciting. My students ‘motivational level is really high because

they know that they are coming to a classroom that's cool, it's fun, it's exciting, it's comfortable.

Ben further stresses that having those basic things allows him to execute his job efficiently and effectively. A space where parents and students feel safe and protected during their most vulnerable state is crucial to the successful execution of his job. Just as PSM focuses on making sure the physical and social-emotional needs are met for the students to ensure they can learn; Ben and Tony note that addressing the needs of the physical learning space is just as important and necessary.

Human Resources

The professional capacity of the staff is important in fostering success during school reform. During the interviews, participants shared that the quantity of personnel is important and can impact the quality of work. The instructional coach role is a strong example of that thought, especially with the impact it has on school reform success. Vonda and Jean, both novice teachers, spoke specifically to the quantity of support available through the instructional coach role. In her first year, Ebony was one of two instructional coaches; however, in her second year, during the case study, Ebony became the only coach supporting LES. With two coaches in the building, Vonda and Jean described the support as intentional, visible, and sustainable. They were adamant that this statement is not a reflection on Ebony's job performance or her skill set; however, at LES, "the need is so great that one person cannot do it all." Almost half of the staff have historically been novice teachers. Ebony sometimes found herself overwhelmed trying to support K-2 teachers with the literacy focus and 3-5 teachers with preparation for the

end-of-year assessment. When many of the incoming students each year are below grade level, and the expectation of growth is high, there is a high level of urgency that requires an appropriate number of people to share the load.

Supporting Students with Special Needs

Student Behaviors and Special Education were both areas that participants felt they lacked in personnel resources. Within the last couple of years, LES saw an extremely large increase in suspensions as school leadership worked to get a handle on behaviors. Ray and Tina made multiple requests to the district for support in managing the behaviors so that both could monitor and support instruction. For multiple years, Ray requested an additional position to not only support students in crisis with difficult behaviors but also provide training and support for staff members to create safe and supportive learning environments. With excitement, Ray shared that once Rose came on board, he was no longer “going from discipline issue to discipline issue. There’s a buffer ... and I can spend more time focused on instruction.”

Aside from an increase in behaviors, Tony shared that LES has a high concentration of students with disabilities or students in the tiered instructional program, who may go through the special education process at some point. With such dire needs in this area, Tony asks, “Why do you [SED] not give us additional personnel and people that can combat that? At LES, we need everyone just for our school” As a result of low special education staffing, the special education process at LES is described as sluggish, again impacting the educational performance of a key student group of the total population. As leadership discussed the recruitment of high-quality staff, they highlighted

the implications of district recruitment initiatives. Ebony explained that “at one school you get a stipend, at ours you do not. It makes it hard to recruit teachers, it’s competitive.” Unequal recruitment efforts and financial incentives between schools add a layer of difficulty to building a strong foundation for success.

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on PSM and the Equity Gap

Participants shared many of their experiences and thoughts around equity, school closures, and the impact on their professional practice. Although COVID-19 is not directly connected to general school reform implementation, there is value in understanding how reform practices were impacted by remote learning and school closure. At the time of the data collection, SED was entering the eighth month of school closures (not including summer months). Since school closure, researchers and advocates across the nation have identified School closures required, technology access, reliable internet, a learning environment conducive to learning, and, most importantly, access to food. During the school closure, feeding sites were set up to support families in need; however, Ray discovered that two of his neighborhoods were not able to be served because of the distance. Families and sometimes students had to walk multiple miles to pick up their meals. Out of concern for their students, Ray and Tina advocated for an additional feeding site to support their families, reaffirming the idea that until basic needs are met, equitable and excellent schooling cannot occur. Access to schooling, instruction, content, and education is important in any school, but especially in a school going through reform. LES staff have worked creatively to increase accessibility to schooling during this time. As a mitigating measure to address the “equity gap,” Tony and other

teachers created and home learning bookbags. The teachers wanted to remain true to the PSM expectation of student instructional engagement, progress monitoring, and data analysis while acknowledging the needs of the students.

Instructional and Curricular Practices

As mentioned in Chapter II, the needs in schools such as LES are so unique and dire that states and districts are sometimes looking for a quick fix that is research-based and presented in an easy-to-implement manner. To the staff at LES, this translates to a scripted curriculum that simplifies the supervision process of curriculum implementation, pacing, and instructional quality, while supporting teachers in planning and execution. In Dimension 2, participants discussed the impact of a scripted curriculum on mastery of instructional practice. Participants also shared differing perspectives of the curriculum regarding equitable decision-making practices by the district. Vonda and Jean, novice teachers, appreciated the curriculum because it gave them a starting point, a foundation. Tony understands the value but argues that programs are “great for teachers in [years 1-5] ... everything is there for you. But other teachers, we have a foundation and a base, we don’t need a script.” Participants showed both appreciation and frustration. During professional development or iRound conversations, teachers asked the district, “Do you realize where our children are with this program? Were you thinking of us when you gave us this program, or are you thinking of the school on a hill?” This conversation spotlights the practice of districts implementing a system-wide curriculum that sometimes fails to meet the expectations due to the diverse needs within the district. Tina argues that “If we are going to have true school reform, we’re gonna have to find out how the

children learn,” acknowledging that stepping out of the box of the scripted curriculum is sometimes necessary to get the results we need.

Participants also discussed how they exercised equity in their planning, PLCs, and instruction to benefit their students. Vonda shared that at the time of this interview, she has been working to adjust the sequencing of the reading curriculum to ensure students did not miss out on a learning experience that she thought was more impactful than mastering a reading skill. Over the year, she noticed that it took the students longer to get through the various modules in each unit, never quite making it to the fourth module, stating:

Our fourth module text is a big ‘ole picture book based on the Negro baseball league. When 90% of my class is African American, how is that text the fourth module that we’re not gonna be able to get to? Why are we leaving out the African American text?

Such a powerful statement, by a first-year teacher, illustrates the need to see and understand just who the students are as a group and as individuals. Acknowledging that sometimes they need a little different, or a little extra, along with teacher autonomy is important in creating space for instructional excellence.

Professional Development

Creating a professional development plan that speaks to the diverse needs of each school during reform is paramount to the success of that individual school. The participants candidly shared their experiences and perceptions of the professional development plan implemented by SED. Teachers and administrators alike appreciated

the support that the PSM Support Team provided to them throughout the year that spoke to their specific needs while also identifying some areas of growth and action steps they took as a school.

Tina discussed the personal support team provided to LES that helped to address specific instructional areas. The team came out on a weekly basis to not only answer questions but conduct iRounds with the leadership team and provide feedback to teachers during their planning sessions. The teachers appreciated this act of support because it ensured that the information they were given regarding curriculum implementation and instructional practices were specific to LES and not a duplicate of information given to all schools. Teachers were able to ask questions that pertained to their needs and receive answers to help build their confidence in their instructional and professional practice.

Along the same lines of district support, Ben spoke about the support that he received as the social worker in the building. When you are the only one in that role, the district will pair you with a colleague from another school, a beneficial and necessary decision. Ben states that the mentor is amazing and has helped him to learn the ‘do’s and don’ts’ of the role, which is so important as a first-year social worker. He does note the difference in their experiences, as the mentor works in a school with a demographic on the other end of the spectrum. Parent and community engagement, student needs, and backgrounds look completely different. “This is a different world,” he candidly stated. It is fair to note that this may speak to the availability of human resources across the district, recognizing that the level of urgency needed to find success at a school like

Lincoln Elementary School is unique to that environment and areas of needs and drives the work of the participants and their colleagues.

Grand Theme 2: Urgency

We don't have a lot of time to get it right and correct our mistakes ... the time that we have is precious. ~ Ray Martin, Principal

The need for swift action was a recurring theme in participant responses. In their own way, each participant stated that there was no time to waste in getting the job done, with an emphasis on results and getting them quickly. While the results centered on student academic performance and growth, the participants also noted other areas of concern that impacted their ability to get the results by finding solutions and implementing actions that will address those areas of concern quickly and effectively.

Academic Time

Academic growth is important in this study, as student performance on end-of-year assessments is the deciding factor in the status of a school. School leadership and teachers alike discussed the impact of available time to create academic growth. Ray calls them "boomerang kids ... they leave us in October, they come back in April." When they return, there is no clear picture of where they have been, what they have learned, and how much they need. What is clear is the window of time between April and the end of the year. Jean recounts her experience last year when she had 20 students in her classroom, but by the end of the year, she had only seven of her original students. She stated that it was "like starting over so many times." As a result of this transient population, a

characteristic of high-poverty/low-performing schools, the time available for teachers to have a true influence on academic growth is greatly impacted. If the available time is not impacted by transiency, then truancy is the other factor. Ben stated that “these babies are out of the school 15, 20 days at a time.” During this time, their experiences or access to education are unknown, with teachers unaware of how much instruction is lost. She discussed how that impacted her data, her analysis, and how hard and fast she had to work to make up for time because one thing that does not change is the expectation at the end of the year. Vonda adds another layer by reiterating during the interview that such a large group of students come in below level, that not only are they trying to catch them up on the grade level concepts but must first help students grasp some of the basic skills they are lacking.

To support the academic growth needed, Tine stated that she, along with Ray and Ebony, vowed “to make it a priority of getting in the classrooms” so that teachers can receive the help and support needed to make the necessary growth. She also stressed the importance of collecting and analyzing data in a way that supports finding solutions for the transiency, truancy, and low academic preparation prevalent in LES.

Creating a Pipeline of Teacher Leaders

Urgency in creating academic growth was not the only area of focus for LES; overall, there was urgency in addressing unique needs or issues within the LES school community. Teacher collaboration and leadership was an area of urgency with teacher turnover, lack of instructional personnel, and the many little fires that must be addressed throughout the year. Ebony described the urgency she saw in teacher collaboration and

leadership as a major success for LES, stating, “What I really like about Manchester ... was teachers helping teachers across grade levels ... it didn’t matter.” She stated that teachers knew there was a job to get done. The urgency behind creating academic growth and identifying solutions to the various issues that can inhibit the growth and progress during the school reform was a priority for those on the LES bus.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, several themes were presented that emerged through data collection and analysis. All the participants candidly discussed their experiences of implementing school reform at LES, sharing their successes, failures, emotions, strategies, and feedback. The themes were shared within the corresponding dimensions: Instructional Excellence and Alignment, Leadership Capacity, Professional Capacity, and Families and Community. During data analysis, there were two themes that emerged across each dimension in the conceptual framework: Equity and Equitable Practices and Urgency, referred to as grand themes. The findings showed that some participants had more to share than others and are more dominant throughout the chapter, such as the school leadership and veteran teachers, especially those that have been a part of the LES staff for several years.

In the following chapter, the findings will be used to answer the research questions, identify implications, and suggest recommendations for consideration of multiple audiences. Again, the goal of this study is to amplify the voices of the participants to impact school reform, educational leaders, and those who create school reform policy.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CLOSING THOUGHTS

School reform, a multi-layered educational concept, is rooted in the success of various aspects of schooling: instructional mastery, student performance, professional capacity, and community engagement. In this specific case study, Lincoln Elementary, a K-5 low-performing school, has been in a school reform phase for several years. In the last 2 years, LES began implementing the Primary School Model Reform Program at the direction of the governing state. The participants spoke both candidly and passionately, about their implementation experience with school reform, including their successes and failures. The findings from this study show the importance of collaboration, distributive leadership, building capacity, and community engagement. Throughout the data collection and analysis phase, it became evident that school reform success requires more than just knowledge and expertise, but the “individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity and commitment to action” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1).

Conceptual Framework, Themes, and Findings

The purpose of this case study was to authentically capture the thoughts and feelings of educators implementing school reform, amplifying their voice and contributions to this complex process. The dimensions within the PSM Program served as the conceptual framework, with various themes emerging within each dimension. Table 10 identifies the specific themes that emerged in each dimension during data analysis.

Table 10.*Themes Categorized by Dimensions*

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment	
Theme	Description
Creating a Safe and Supportive Learning Environment	Participants' experiences and perspectives on the purpose, benefit, and best practice of classrooms that are conducive to high quality instruction and learning.
Mastery of Curriculum Implementation	Experience of instructional staff members and school leadership to ensure high-quality instruction and curriculum implementation as directed within PSM.
District Instructional Support	Participants' perception and experience of district support to implement the instructional expectations outlined in the PSM, provide impactful development opportunities, and encourage professional growth.
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity	
Organizational Structure for Leadership Support	Participants discussed their experiences with the structure of the school district to support school leadership in effecting change in the building.
Strategic Planning and Vision	Participants' discussion on the impact of clear communication of school and district leadership's vision for school improvement, the effectiveness of structures in place to support the vision and experience of navigating the programming of PSM.
Leadership Presence and Connection	Classroom participants' experience with leadership and support during PSM implementation. Leadership participants' experience in implementing processes to monitor instructional and classroom management practices.
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity	
Creating the Right Culture	Participants' experience and perception of hiring, evaluation practices, and retention efforts that support effective school reform and foster a positive culture from the leadership and teacher perspective.

Dimension 3: Professional Capacity	
Accountability and Autonomy	Participants' discussion of autonomy in implementing the PSM reform program and the level of accountability from the school and district levels.
Professional Development	Participants' perception of professional development offerings, effectiveness, and personal level of engagement.
Dimension 5: Families and Community	
Build Trust through Engagement, Collaboration, and Communication	Participants discussed the impact of and key practices in building trust, along with strategies used to engage, collaborate, and communicate with families.

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment

In this dimension, the school and district are tasked with creating positive and effective learning environments for students, addressing their social and emotional needs and effective classroom management, and creating a professional environment that supports high quality instruction and planning that is data-driven and evidence-based. As participants shared their perspectives and experiences, three themes emerged within this dimension: creating a safe and supportive learning environment, mastery of curriculum implementation, and district instructional support. The roles of the participants span from leadership, classroom teacher, and student support, with each of them stating that addressing the trauma and emotional needs of their students is most important in helping them to fulfill their role responsibilities. The participants discussed the use of morning lessons, the integration of social skills in academic lessons, and programs like Restorative Circles to support an environment conducive to learning.

My findings suggest that in school reform, addressing trauma and supporting children in crisis is key to meeting the goals and expectations of school reform; participants considered poverty to be a primary root cause of the poor academic performance of LES. Ravitch (2013) states that

Poverty affects children's health and well-being. It affects their emotional lives and their attention spans, their attendance, and their academic performance. Poverty affects their motivation and their ability to concentrate on anything other than day-to-day survival (p. 94).

All the participants discussed the various practices implemented to address the impact of poverty listed above and ways that the district has supported this focus. The leadership participants discussed at length their focus on finding the root cause of their struggles, which took a trial-and-error approach at the beginning but allowed them to find an "appropriate diagnosis" to the problem and implement social and emotional programs and practices to build teacher capacity in classroom management (Meyers & Hitt, 2017). Further analysis and findings suggest professional development focused on classroom management and the addition of specific personnel helped to build the capacity of school staff and address the external and internal factors that contribute to chronic low performing schools, according to Murphy and Meyers (as cited in Meyers & Hitt, 2017).

Participants, both veterans and novice, discussed their journey towards the mastery of teaching and implementation of the district-wide curriculum. There were discussions on how the district supported teacher growth and the various curricular programs presented to encourage academic achievement and growth. Both groups of

teachers discussed their journey to mastery implementation, identifying both the benefits and possible concerns with the curricular programs required by SED. While veteran teachers worried about the lack of autonomy or personalization of learning, beginning teachers appreciated the curriculum because it saved them time, gave them a solid starting point, and reduced their workload—the purpose of implementing a common curriculum (Schmoker, 2016). The participants feared that reliance on the scripted curriculum decreased the level of teacher engagement, the opportunity for genuine professional growth, and differentiation for the various types of learners and academic levels in the classrooms. Findings from the data suggest that a curricular foundation is necessary to support the instructional capacity of teachers; however, there is space to debate and consider if scripted or formulaic approaches to instruction support the drastic improvement needed in this environment (Meyers & Hitt, 2017).

The final theme centered on district support and initiatives available to support instructional excellence and alignment. Overall, participants discussed their experience with district initiatives implemented to support curriculum monitoring and mastery of teaching, iRound (leadership), and learning walks (teachers). Findings suggested that these initiatives were highly impactful and most effective as a practice of support from the district. This practice allowed for personalized feedback, real-time coaching, and strong dialogue between teachers and leadership, providing a space for active learning. As active learners, teachers and leadership had opportunities to observe, model, receive feedback, and discuss student work in a collaborative space, as opposed to learning passively through lecture-driven development (Desimone & Pak, 2017). All participants

with instructional-driven roles expressed that these initiatives yielded the most growth for them as instructional masters in their building.

Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity

Various researchers over the years have identified the role of the principal as the catalyst for school transformation, arguing that “turnaround schools must have turnaround principals ... a superior leader with the special skill set to make a difference in highly dysfunctional circumstances” (Meyers & Hitt, 2017, p. 39). Ravitch (2013) goes on to say that evaluating and helping teachers is the most important part of their job as school principals. Three themes emerged within Dimension 2: organizational structure for leadership support, strategic planning and vision, and leadership presence and connection. Participants shared their appreciation for shifts in organizational structure that allowed for my on-site coaching as well as intentional support from mentors, coaches, and evaluators. Mentorship is an initiative solely for principals of low-performing schools in school reform—a welcomed differentiated support structure. My findings suggest that building leadership capacity occurs through the lens of equity—providing personalized support, while also creating an organizational (district) structure that allows for that flexibility. With research identifying the term “turnaround principal” as a signifier of uniqueness, and Clifford stating, “not every principal is capable of turning around schools,” it is necessary to provide a unique support system to ensure success (as cited in Meyers & Hitt, 2017, p. 39).

As participants discussed school leadership and its impact, the ability to create and communicate a clear vision emerged as a theme. Since the implementation of PSM,

participants discussed the clarity of their journey and what the areas of focus are for Lincoln Elementary School: social/emotional learning, literacy, special education. Schmoker (2016) argues that simplicity is key to school leadership success, instructing leaders and teachers to “reject anything that distracts them from their focus ... embrace simplicity” (loc. 76). Teachers admitted that having a clear vision has made it easier to trust and follow school leadership the last year. The clarity did not come without struggle, however. The PSM Program easily identifies strategies, however, the number of practices they must focus on are overwhelming, creating a cycle of successes and failures. Findings from the data suggest that research-based school reform programs that provide areas of focus for schools and districts are helpful in providing clarity; however, finding the balance for simplicity helps to ensure focus and high-quality execution. “When both leaders and employees are given a limited, manageable set of clear priorities ... the opportunity to practice and receive feedback on them ... improvement and enhanced work satisfaction are inevitable,” according to Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Schmoker, 2016, loc. 102).

The final theme in Dimension 2 focused on leadership presence and connection to the stakeholders of the school. As mentioned in Dimension 1, the intentional planning of iRound and learning walks ensured that all stakeholders were provided opportunities for collaboration and growth. Leaders, both district and school, were able to participate in honest dialogue with one another and teachers. Study findings highlight the importance of intentional planning that encourages and carves out time that leadership can genuinely

connect with teachers. Participants stated that this helped to strengthen the relationship with the district leaders, putting faces to names and their hard work.

Dimension 3: Professional Capacity

As district leaders create structures to build the capacity of leadership, they collaborated with school-level leadership to build the capacity of the educators working directly with students daily. This is a practice known as collective capacity building, where the ability of educators at all levels of the system is increased to effect change for all students (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). There were three primary themes that emerged within Dimension 3: creating the right culture (hiring practices), accountability and autonomy, and thirdly professional development.

Participants discussed their experience and perception of creating a positive culture and working environment and the importance of effective hiring practices, an aspect of school reform that is overlooked. With the clear connection between competent teachers, high student performance, and school culture, high teacher turnover has been found to cause emotional stress for staff and academic setbacks for students, not to mention financial hardships for onboarding new staff (Kimbrel, 2019). School leadership participants discussed the struggle in finding the balance of waiting for the right person who understood the vision and making sure there was someone in the classroom when the doors opened. Teacher participants acknowledged the difficulty of coming to an existing school and trying to make changes while on the journey- ridding the school of toxic people. Participants also questioned if they missed out on a great possibility solely because s/he did not check all the boxes. Findings suggest that calibration between those

implementing the hiring process is important in attracting and retaining teachers whose ideals align with the mission and vision of the school while also developing effective interview skills that will identify the right teachers to decrease turnover.

Accountability and autonomy, the second theme within this dimension, emerged primarily from the teacher participants, as they discussed navigating the specificity of school reform expectations and the desire to think creatively about engaging their students using a variety of strategies and resources. Teaching participants discussed how school leadership balanced accountability and autonomy, particularly with the mastery of curriculum implementation. Data from the interviews found that regular collaborative meetings and observations helped to provide that space for autonomy. Leaders were able to see the professional judgment of teachers in action, facilitate critical dialogue among teachers, encouraging motivation, engagement, and retention. These findings align with those of Erichsen and Reynolds (2020), acknowledging the connection between accountability policies to loss of autonomy and teacher resentment, particularly at high-poverty, high-minority schools, resulting in a high teacher turnover rate.

Professional development, the final theme in Dimension 3, is the foundation of building professional capacity. Within this dimension, novice teacher perspectives were most prevalent. Participants discussed the strategies, programs, and practices implemented by LES and SED to build them up to a level of confidence that allowed for them to be successful. While beginning teachers needed the most support, all participants were able to share the most effective development practices, particularly the separation between coach and evaluator. Desimone and Pak (2017) identify the five effective

practices for coaching as professional development: (a) content focus; (b) active learning; (c) coherence; (d) sustained duration; and (e) collective participation, noting that evaluation or evaluating is not a part of this development process. These practices support the findings that participants felt that the most productive professional development happened with reflection, dialogue, collaboration, and consistency without fear of a punitive response or negative evaluations during the learning process.

Dimension 5: Families and Community

The final dimension focused on the connection between the community and the school. Having a strong connection between home and school is vital to the success of school reform. Previous studies show that turnaround principals valued and implemented “substantial parent involvement efforts” to reiterate the need for collaboration (Meyers & Hitt, 2017, p. 51). All participants described the various efforts employed to engage parents, encourage clear communication, and provide skill-building and resources to support their children. Participants stated that they focused on ways to build trust and help to improve their quality of life through educational opportunities, technology skills, etc. Within each of their roles, participants discussed the support needed to increase parent engagement and involvement. The social worker discussed needs for resources, coaching, and development to support parent and social needs. The behavior coach discussed the need for a schedule that supports classroom instruction on social-emotional learning and teacher training. Teachers discussed support in helping parents to understand the value of early intervention, various strategies they could use at home to help students practice foundational skills. Findings suggest the need and desire to implement what

Ravitch (2013) calls wraparound solutions, “interrelated solutions that are integrated in and around the school” (p. 254), to support both parents and students and address issues directly related to poverty-stricken communities. All participants feel that LES and SED are moving in the right direction as they continue to focus on strategies and practices to bridge the gap between home and school.

Summary of Grand Themes

Equity and Equitable Practices and Urgency, two themes that emerged within each dimension, were overwhelmingly discussed by all participants. These grand themes addressed multiple aspects of schooling: community access, instructional practices/resources, professional development, and capital and human resources (see Table 11). Participants talked at length about the programs and practices they put in place to support their work. As the participants discussed their role during school reform, the need for better and additional resources, both capital and human, was a recurring topic of discussion. Support to help address social-emotional and health needs was an important key to the school practitioners during implementation. Having resources to support LES in addressing children in crisis and trauma was important to the participants to create an environment conducive to learning. As teachers discussed equitable instructional support, the desire for professional development and instructional tools that aligned with the specific needs of LES while addressing the school district was evident. The largest discussion centered on equitable practices with human resource needs, such as recruitment, hiring, and staffing availability.

Table 11.

Grand Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Description
Grand Theme 1: Equity and Equitable Practices	Experiences, perspectives, discussions, and actions that centered around the idea of equity and actions or initiatives that address and foster an environment of success for LES stakeholders.
Grand Theme 2: Urgency	Experiences, perspectives, discussions, and needs that speak to the swift action taken by stakeholders of LES to address identified issues.

Lack of time was a recurring concern for LES staff, not due to school day hours or the number of days on the calendar, but the amount of work needed to be done. Each participant discussed how student attendance impacted their role. Teachers had to constantly adjust their instruction to meet the personalized needs of the students while navigating pacing and testing. School leaders acknowledged the urgency to be present in the classrooms to lead instructional excellence and support teachers through real-time coaching and feedback. Finally, with such a heavy workload, the need to develop teacher leaders was urgent to ensure the work was manageable and success was attainable.

Research Questions and Findings

School reform requires engagement from all levels of stakeholders: policymakers, district leadership, school leadership, teachers, and the community. The research questions and findings were used to determine recommendations and next steps regarding school reform policy and implementation for stakeholders of public-school education.

1. *Primary Research Question: What are the experiences and perceptions of educators at Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School (LES) during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program (PSM)?*

The participants shared many personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that span across various concepts and themes. My findings suggest that educators believe that equity and the use of equitable practices are important to the long-term and sustainable success of the reform. While organizational process, procedures, and practices are necessary to effect change across multiple units within an organization, the participants spoke on the value of identifying the specific needs of the school; needs such as community access, professional development, and resources. Acknowledging and identifying those unique needs of LES was important to the participants and key to creating a positive experience where they felt heard, valued, and supported. The support through targeted learning walks with both school and district leadership was vital to differentiating instructional coaching and support, while creating an organizational structure for leadership support highlighted the importance of building leadership capacity.

Within this environment, it is easy for practitioners to feel overwhelmed by the workload that is unique to their environment. Participants perceived equitable hiring practices to be a forgotten focus by policymakers and district leadership, resulting in a lack of effective hiring practices, particularly recruitment incentives. This missed opportunity hindered progress in recruiting highly qualified, effective, and experienced teaching staff, directly impacting morale, school culture, and student achievement.

Participants discussed the frustration of being unable to build strong relationships with colleagues due to turnover or the struggle with having the capacity to provide such a high level of support to struggling teachers. The hiring of non-traditional roles, such as the behavior coach, was a great example of an equitable hiring practice that fostered a successful and positive professional environment for staff. School leaders felt just that one addition helped them to increase leadership presence and connection to the teachers in classrooms and PLCs. Participants, however, also highlighted the impact of losing an instructional coach position, a high-value position, resulting in a shift in the instructional workload. Considerations such as these will help support the higher number of novice teachers, divide the workload, and support work-life balance, in turn creating the right culture.

Additionally, the data show that participants valued genuine accountability and autonomy during school reform and considered that to be an important part of school reform implementation, strengthening their practice and skill set. Participants shared that accountability became a part of their culture as the stakeholders from SPD and LES moved away from the top-down leadership model, viewing one another as thought partners. Creating collaborative spaces that encouraged honest conversations around needs, successes and failures was an appreciated practice. Transparent communication between all levels of stakeholders to ensure that accountability and autonomy are balanced has implications for the fidelity of the school reform and curricular programs.

Sub-Question #1: What lessons have staff and district leaders learned from their experience of implementing the Primary Support Model Program?

School reform, a complex educational concept, provides many opportunities for growth and development for all involved. The findings suggest that learning to prioritize through collaborative strategic planning and visualization was the most impactful lesson learned over the course of this school reform. Both teachers and leaders acknowledged that urgency without direction was just as ineffective as ignoring the problem altogether. All participants discussed their journey in learning how to identify priorities to address the root causes of low performance, collaborate to create a focused and intentional plan, and implement with the highest level of fidelity. In an environment where there are multiple opportunities for growth, it was important to the participants to figure out which opportunity would allow for the biggest successes. While the framework provided the 12 key indicators, participants had to learn to navigate the reform model expectations and identify which indicators would be school priorities. A narrower focus in the PSM framework would decrease the need to master so many areas at one time.

Additional findings suggest that addressing trauma and supporting children in crisis is important to the academic and instructional success of the students and school. Participants learned that school reform could not solely center on the academic performance of students or the teachers' instructional competency. During this process, participants learned they needed to shift their focus to identify and implement mitigating measures to address external factors that were impacting student learning, creating a safe and supportive learning environment. As a result, all participants justified the need to build educator capacity in addressing social-emotional needs in children through targeted professional development. Findings from the experiences of the student support

practitioners (e.g., behavior coach and social worker) suggest the need for intense development in helping educators in this role to build the capacity of teachers in the building and becoming effective resources for the general school population.

While addressing children in crisis, participants also acknowledged the value of community partnership and engagement. During the implementation process, it is easy to become focused on everything happening inside the four walls of the school: student performance, teacher development, teacher retention, and countless other needs. Participants, however, had to remind themselves of the importance and power of family and community engagement. Each participant shared the lessons learned in identifying and removing the barriers to building trust through engagement, collaboration, and communication with the community. Again, implementing processes that address the language barriers had such a positive impact on parent support and student achievement.

While there are so many smaller lessons learned during this process, the three mentioned were discussed among multiple participants during the data collection process. Identifying the lessons learned through the process is key to providing actionable insights and best practices to further guide school reform implementation.

Sub-Question #2: What do educators perceive to be best practices for school improvement during the implementation of the Primary Support Model Program?

The findings from the data identified three actions the collective group of participants considered to be best practices during their experience. The first best practice addresses the PSM Program Framework Model, aligning with the theme Strategic Planning and Vision. When implementing school reform, the number of goals (key

indicators) required of the school plays a large role in how efficient staff members perceive themselves to be. Participants, specifically school leadership and the instructional coach, experienced low self-efficacy at various points during this implementation. School leadership found it difficult to focus on setting goals, creating action steps, reflecting on performance, and readjusting the plan consistently and with fidelity. There were so many goals and indicators for participants to focus on that they got lost in the tasks and found themselves sometimes “checking a box,” according to Ebony. Those who interacted directly with the framework model through the School Improvement Team agreed that the chances of finding success or experiencing quick wins would increase if there were fewer key indicators to address.

The second practice considered to be highly effective based on participant experience is on-site coaching through observations, dialogue, and feedback—professional development through active learning. The Instructional Coach and teaching participants found the most success with student and teacher performance when active learning was applied. Not only did this practice encourage critical and consistent dialogue between school and district, providing that space for transparency, but teachers had an opportunity to view the skill or practice in action, ask targeted questions and receive real-time feedback. School leadership also found district instructional support through active learning most impactful and proactive in addressing any misconceptions to ensure that skill and practice will be executed effectively in the future and that teachers can share the strategies with others. Allowing for master teachers to facilitate active learning

opportunities was also helpful in creating a strong culture and strengthening the mastery of curriculum implementation.

Along those lines, school leadership found success with the execution of distributive leadership. This leadership practice not only shifted the culture but also helped to develop the professional and leadership capacity of teacher-leaders across the building. An open concept of distributive leadership allowed for all teachers to feel valued for what they could offer to the overall vision, not just “expert” or veteran teachers. When school leadership provided space for teachers to lead and take on responsibility, there was a higher level of urgency due to buy-in and accountability.

Finally, school leadership expressed their happiness with the district shift in leadership development. Creating an organizational support structure that delineates between evaluators, coaches, and mentors was a key lever in fostering genuine and long-term growth in leadership. The principal found that having a support system that was not directly connected to his evaluation allowed him to ask questions and have conversations that allowed for vulnerability, a key piece to authentic growth. The district also applied that development practice to teachers by creating mentoring programs such as PALS that gave novice teachers a non-judgmental space. In this space, they felt safe to make mistakes and ask questions. This practice, while productive, can consume financial and human resources; therefore, not all participants are afforded this opportunity. The principal, however, hoped that building his capacity to lead change would help to strengthen the school reform process.

Expectation vs. Reality

After detailed analysis, this section briefly addresses the expectations of school reform and connecting to the reality of the challenges LES faced through the themes of the study. School reform has three overarching goals to improve schools: (a) positive impact on student performance; (b) recruit, create, retain master teachers; and (c) provide intense training (Lee & Min, 2017). With any process for change, there are varied challenges that present themselves that can be quick wins or require a long-term plan for success. In the following sections, I briefly discuss the goals of reform and the challenges of bringing reform to life from the perspective of the participants.

Goal: Positive Impact on Student Learning

The primary goal of reform is to increase student performance on an identified summative assessment. There are various structures that must be in place to support learning. One of the challenges the participants discussed centers around the strategic planning and vision of the structures needed to support the practitioners in doing the work of the reform. The primary challenge was the inability to focus on the key levers to encourage high-quality teaching and learning. Teachers specifically found the concept of curriculum implementation to be a challenge during reform due to district leaders making changes, sometimes prematurely, to curricular tools. Not only does the shift in curriculum make it more difficult to learn the tool, but sometimes the curricular shift is not an equitable decision for the students of LES.

Highly effective teachers must teach students to create a positive impact on student learning. This requires schools and districts to recruit, create, and retain master

teachers. Finding and recruiting high-quality, experienced teachers is a challenge for school leaders if structures are not in place, such as incentives, training on effective hiring practices, etc. Again, a strategic plan to address that need is necessary to reform that aspect of schooling. Having strong, professional, and positive people on the bus is instrumental in creating a positive culture, which helps to retain teachers and other staff that support the vision. Implementing reform can be stressful for everyone involved; therefore, structures that decrease stress, distribute the workload and leadership, and celebrate teachers will ensure that high-quality educators remain in the building.

School reform also creates a high level of accountability for districts and schools in improving instructional practice, leading to intense professional development. A challenge in this area is facilitating professional development that aligns with the needs and culture of LES. SPD and other districts sometimes fall prey to creating a “one-size-fits-all” professional development plan that aligns with the curriculum but misses the opportunity to include the unique needs of the schools in the planning and implementation.

Suggestions for Future Research

The primary and sole focus of this study was the perception and experience of educators at Lincoln Elementary School during the implementation of the Primary School Model Program, a federally mandated school improvement program. Over the course of the data collection phase, the participants discussed multiple concepts, ideas, and areas of reform that are suggested for further research, providing basic needs, for example. Earlier in this chapter, the concept of “wraparound services” and its connection to improving

education and decreasing poverty was discussed. There are four wrap-around solutions provided by Ravitch (2013) to address the “social and economic conditions that cause disadvantage” (p. 253), as seen in Table 12.

Table 12.

Wraparound Solutions

Solution #1:	Every school should have a nurse, doctor, or health clinic to ensure that children get regular medical checkups and prompt treatment for illnesses.
Solution #2:	Disadvantaged children should have summer programs that give them enrichment activities, sports, the arts, tutoring, and literacy activities to maintain the gains of the previous academic year.
Solution #3:	Parent education will support and intensify the impact of all other interventions.
Solution #4:	Provide opportunities for disadvantaged children to participate in excellent after-school enrichment programs.

Note. Source: Ravitch (2013).

Because schools in reform primarily serve high poverty and high minority populations, there is a need to research and understand the impact of including and implementing wraparound services as a key part of school reform policies. The participants discussed their “aha” moments during their social and emotional learning professional development. Additional research would be beneficial in identifying key practices in professional development that strengthen the cultural responsiveness capacity of those serving communities of poverty or color.

The participants that were in the novice phase of their employment (less than 3 years) discussed the benefits of professional development in the form of mentorship, describing the various types of mentorships and coaching provided to them. The PALS program, specifically for beginning teachers, was a favorite because it focused on creating mentor groups of women and men. Based on her excitement about the program, her peers, and mentors, this created interest in homogeneous mentorship as a pairing opportunity for mentorship programs. It is important to note that homogeneous mentorship not only applies to gender but also to school type as that experience directly impacts the level of support that the mentor can provide to the mentee, a desire mentioned by Benjamin regarding the social worker. Further research could be helpful to district leaders as they work to create and facilitate effective mentor programs that develop equitable and excellent educators and foster a positive culture with high retention rates.

Finally, the student support educators that participated in this study worked hard to support the mission and vision of the school. The key to school reform success is using all the power and talent that is available in the building. Thinking about participants like Clinton, Rose, and Benjamin, they possess different skillsets as an ELL Teacher, Behavior Coach, and Social Worker that are still important to school reform and could be leveraged to ensure long-term success. While there is understandably a primary focus on math and literacy in school reform, further research on how district and school leaders can be developed to leverage the skillset of student support or non-core teachers to foster additional growth is necessary.

Recommendations for Stakeholders and Closing Thoughts

School reform, a multi-layered educational concept, is well researched in many aspects. As mentioned in chapter one, the purpose of this study was to address the research gap of educator perception during the implementation of school reform. The participants shared a multitude of experiences during this time, highlighting successes, failures, and lessons learned. Each of the following recommendations is supported by the research and findings, with an audience of four target groups: policymakers, district leaders, leaders of higher education institutions, and community advocates. Although the responsibility of school reform is not solely attached to these target groups, they are key to the planning and facilitating of the school reform programs required of public schools such as Lincoln Elementary School.

Receivment Gap

During the data collection phase, the participants talked at length about the resources needed to make their work at least manageable- if not easier. Through data analysis and further research, it was discovered that participants were describing what is called the “receivment gap,” a concept identified by Chambers (as cited in Duke & VanGronigen, 2018). The receivment gap is a concept that focuses on educational inputs such as human and capital resources and specific school needs as compared to the achievement gap, which focuses more on student outputs (Duke & VanGronigen, 2018). This concept not only impacts all the target area groups but also connects to the recommendations provided below.

Policymakers

The requirements included in school reform policies and programs are crafted by state government officials. Addressing school reform and effecting change is an important task and requires a diverse group of writers that can approach school reform with varied experiences and skills. Based on the information shared during the interviews, the following recommendations are proposed to those who create policy.

As the world around us continues to change, it is important to include policies with a noticeable focus on social and emotional learning and support and development to create a safe learning environment while providing the development that educators need. Policymakers are recommended to include language and funding that directly impacts the connection between districts/schools and social service agencies. This recommendation is aimed at closing the achievement gap in schools to provide better access to social workers, nurses, mental health, and other social programs. Addressing these areas with intention and consistency will prove to decrease the disadvantages attached to those who are in poverty.

Additionally, policymakers are encouraged to think about the practicality of the expectations on students, educators, and districts. Having a one-size-fits-all approach to school reform proves to be detrimental to the goal progress of individual schools, as the policies aim to address every problem seen in every low-performing school. Previous research and data collected during this study discuss the impact of unattainable goals for schools and districts. Most importantly, policies that highlight too many areas of focus causes leaders to struggle with prioritizing. Again, allowing autonomy and space to drill

down to three key levers will allow schools to find success in strong incremental steps, encouraging a long-term, sustainable school reform.

School District

The school district has the daunting task of implementing and monitoring school reform for multiple schools, with different needs and in different places in the reform process. As districts work to improve schools, it is recommended that their actions reflect the expectation of teachers in the classroom—differentiation and personalization of support. School leaders and teachers discussed the resources or support needed to address their areas of growth that seemed to sometimes be overlooked if they did not fit into the pre-determined practices. If districts miss this opportunity to model this key approach, there is a possibility of creating a disconnect and lack of engagement between schools and districts.

As districts focus on what individual schools need, taking the time to identify the areas that reflect a receivment gap can help address the lack of human resources or quality placement of staff. An organizational structure analysis is recommended to identify where the needs are and where movement can happen to support the identified needs. This is especially important when we think about instructional support roles. This structure analysis should happen on a regular basis to ensure that employees and districts do not get stagnant in job performance and continue to serve in the most effective way. While the quality placement of employees is important and necessary for successful schooling, it starts with hiring the right people. Based on this study, it is recommended that districts include development on hiring practices for school leadership. Research

states that there is a key to effective hiring practices, especially in low-performing schools, because these schools require a certain kind of person to carry the vision.

Development of leadership is a key aspect of school reform; however, research states that there is a type of leader that sometimes gets overlooked—the assistant principal. This is easy to do, as the principal, especially if s/he is a novice principal, can be consumed with meeting the expectations of their role, leaving the “other tasks” to the assistant principal, missing opportunities to develop his/her skill set. In this study, it was mentioned that many people were available to help; however, there was not a clear, comprehensive administrative support plan for assistant principals. It is my strong recommendation that districts include this level of training in their comprehensive development plan. This not only builds leadership capacity for each of their leaders but also strengthens the leadership pipeline, creating a strong foundation for schools on multiple levels. Regarding development, districts are also recommended to revisit their mentorship programs for leaders and teachers. Mentorship was discussed as a key piece to continued engagement in the role, self-directed learning, and development. How are the mentors trained? How do the mentees perceive the program’s effectiveness? As a core level of support, it is worth the time and effort to make sure that it is done right to decrease the turnover rate.

The final recommendation for districts based on this case study is providing intentional space for teachers to participate in curriculum-based dialogue with district leaders. This applies to decisions about choosing a curriculum and providing feedback throughout implementation. Providing this opportunity can have a positive impact on

multiple aspects of schooling: instructional practice, student growth, employee retention, employee development, leadership development. Teachers that feel valued and heard become invested in the final product. This also creates a level of transparency and connection between the classroom and district, supporting a high level of implementation fidelity.

Leaders in the Higher Education Community

Instructional excellence and mastery do not start when a teacher is hired or on the first day of school; it begins in their pre-service training. Higher education institutions are extremely important to the sustainability of school reform success and creating a strong and valuable pipeline of teachers. A partnership with districts and charter schools is the first step because it helps to marry the practical and theoretical experiences. However, this does not happen without planning. Higher education institutions are recommended to create multi-year internship plans that expose pre-service teachers to school environments, particularly low-performing schools. Although everyone is not meant for this environment, exposure is important to help with cultural responsiveness and understanding of the environment. Creating programs where schools can “grow their own teachers” in turn creates teachers that have the will and skill to work in hard-to-staff environments. Building strong relationships such as this opens doors for professional development between the school/district and university, as well as continuing education opportunities for employees.

Providing early exposure in internships also ensures that the pre-service training is rooted in practicality which is key to the success of teachers and high teacher retention.

Practical experience in training is important in any school environment, but especially in low-performing schools that are layered with several external and internal issues that are inhibiting its success. Within the pre-service programs, classes that directly address cultural responsiveness are critical to helping districts that are looking to hire those that understand the mission and vision. Classes that focus on this area can help pre-service teachers identify their implicit and explicit biases that have the power to impede their relationship-building with the community, parents, and students. Honest dialogue around social justice and race is difficult but necessary, especially as we see more hyper-segregated schools with staff members that do not always reflect the student body and population they serve.

Community Advocates

Throughout this study, community partnership has been an important aspect of school reform; strategies such as building a relationship with the community, creating opportunities for parent growth and engagement, or providing social services are important to school reform success. There are a couple of recommendations for community advocates who also work to improve the schools that serve their students. The first recommendation, which could have the biggest impact, is having community advocates be a part of policy creation through consultation or participating in the actual writing of the policy. This will ensure that the policies include the perspectives of a key stakeholder. Those in the community can share their experiences which can impact what expectations or services are included in the policy.

One of the wraparound solutions explicitly identifies community programs as a strategy to benefit children and mitigate the issues connected to poverty. Solutions such as afterschool enrichment activities, tutoring, the arts, and sports are ways to engage students, expose them to experiences that otherwise may not be provided. This would also require districts seeking out and working with community programming in a collaborative spirit, while the community resources strive to provide high-quality experiences and support for the students, both academic and extra-curricular. Working with the school/district to create practical programs that build skills in parents that can improve their quality of life is important to increasing parent engagement. Working with the community requires someone who can dedicate their time to making this initiative work on both the school/district and community sides. This can be a daunting task and therefore needs dedicated people to help make it happen.

Closing Thoughts

This experience has been one of challenges, enlightenment, and change. I have always been interested in education, as both my parents were educators, with my father specializing in school reform and turning around low-performing schools across our home state. My educator experience has varied with the type of schools that I have worked in, as well as the roles that I have served. For the last 16 years, I have been a teacher and administrator in two of the lowest-performing schools and one of the highest performing schools in the state. My goal was to get a better understanding of school reform—what makes it work and what causes it to fail.

When it became apparent that I would complete this case study at Lincoln Elementary School, in a district that I never worked in, with little familiarity, I did not know what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised and inspired by the conversations, the hard work, and the passion from each of the participants. What became clear to me is that the will is high, and the skill is not too far behind, but the expectation and ways in which to get to the goal are impeded by factors that they cannot control. This confirmed for me that this study is important in creating effective school reform programs that, in turn, create excellent and equitable schools.

How did we get to this point? I believe that school reform has turned into a massive and complex educational concept that is difficult to manage, hard to focus on, and frustrating to implement. Why? Because the frontline workers were taken out of the equation. Educators who work in the building and are responsible for bringing the policy to life have the power to share feedback that reflects the everyday needs and experiences that directly impact student learning. The participants shared that they appreciate the time and space to share their thoughts and experiences. Being a rural district, they are not always given the opportunity to be heard outside of the four walls of the Southeastern Public School District. The feeling of being heard is invaluable. I did not take that statement lightly—it confirmed for me that educators need to be heard.

The receivment gap concept, which many participants implied throughout the interviews, can transform how school reform is approached. This study has shown me that if we are focusing on what we pour into the schools, just as much as the scores that

come out, we can create schools with high morale and a positive culture setting the groundwork for a successful school reform environment.

The Primary School Model Program outlines the aspects of schooling that ensure success, Instructional Excellence, Leadership and Professional Capacity, and Communities and Family. Lincoln Elementary is working hard to be successful on this journey, and I truly believe the educators and students in that building have the support that they need. As they continue to work through the PSM Program (Conceptual Framework) and are learning to prioritize and focus on those key levers, the success will come and will start to become sustainable.

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APPENDIX A.

IRB APPROVAL



OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY
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Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.
PO Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
336.256.0253
Web site: www.uncg.edu/orc
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

To: Marva Pittman
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
2205 Foxtrot Rd. Raleigh, NC 27610

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 9/30/2019

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation,4.Secondary data/specimens

Study #: 19-0087

Study Title: Primary School Model: Through their Eyes

This submission has been reviewed by the 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:

This will be a single case study of an elementary school in a large district in the Southeastern part of the nation. The elementary school opened under a new student assignment plan that no longer used socio-economic status to assign students, instead using neighborhood nodes to determine student placement. Because of the increase in low performing schools, the district identified a cohort of elementary schools that would receive targeted support and development through the Primary School Model Program (PSMP). The study will identify and describe the perceptions and experiences of staff implementing the program through interviews, focus groups, observations and document analysis.

Investigator's Responsibilities

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. **Please utilize the the consent form/information sheet with the most recent version date when enrolling participants.** The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/.

APPENDIX B.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT (Individual Interview)

Project Title: Primary School Model: Through their Eyes

Principal Investigator: Marva R. Pittman

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carl Lashley

Participant Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge to help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, please feel free to ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research project, and your participation is voluntary. The purpose of the study is to learn more about the perceptions of teachers and administrators who are working in a school implementing a school reform program.

Why are you asking me?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are currently working in a school that is implementing a school reform program to improve the school and student achievement.

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

You are being asked to participate in an interview with the principal investigator. The interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes using a teleconferencing program. During this interview, you will be asked questions about your experience and perceptions of the implementation of the school reform model in your school.

What are the risks to me?

In order to maintain participant confidentiality during the presentation of research findings to educators, all opinions will be expressed as a group. The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. If you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact Marva Pittman, principal Investigator, by telephone at (919) 215-0713 or by email at mrpittma@uncg.edu or Dr. Carl Lashley, Faculty Advisor by phone at (336) 549-9163 or by email at c_lashley@uncg.edu.

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

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

The benefits of this study may improve the writing and implementation of school reform programs required of public schools. These benefits could include improvement in professional development offerings, delivery methods, and policy writing that directly impacts school reform.

Will the interview be recorded?

Both the initial interview and any follow-up interview will be recorded. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below in the confidentiality section.

Confidentiality

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Each interviewee will be assigned a pseudonym and code so that raw data cannot be tied directly to a specific individual. The data will be stored in the UNCG Box account. The data key will be stored on a password-protected computer with an encrypted hard drive.

During the interview process, the data will be recorded on an iOS device that is encrypted with a passcode lock and unlocks. The data will be transferred after the interview, within 24 hours, to the UNCG Box account to ensure data security and confidentiality. UNCG's Box application meets all the university security standards.

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

No compensation will be provided to participate in the study.

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.”

Please keep this form for your records. This will serve as your consent to participate in the study.

APPENDIX C.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This is qualitative research. The principal investigator will use the unstructured/informal interview structure as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The questions are purposely intended to be open-ended and in an informal setting for collecting data. It is also noted that after data analysis, there may be a need for a follow-up interview.

Introductory Questions

1. Tell me about your professional journey and how you came to work for Southeastern Public-School District at Xavier P. Lincoln Elementary School? What is your role and position?
2. What is your experience with school reform? If you have experience, what have you found that makes school reform successful in the building?

Preparation of Implementation

3. Describe the rollout of this program to those in your role for your role?
4. Tell me about the professional development/training you received prior to the start of PSM? How did you feel during this time?

During the Implementation

5. What impact did the PSM Policy have on the execution of your role? Did expectations in the role of your position change?
6. As an employee at LES, what do you perceive to be your role in meeting the goals of the PSM program? How did Southeastern Public-School District support you in that effort? Describe the professional development you received to implement this school reform model.

Reflection of Implementation

7. There are five dimensions and key indicators within the policy that have served as the guide of school reformation at LES. I have provided those for you in this document. Describe for me, based on your perception, how the district has addressed these areas. Have you had any direct impact or connection to any of those as? In what way?
8. What were the pros and cons of this program? What do you consider to be the biggest successes and biggest failures?
9. If district leadership solicited feedback from you regarding the implementation of PSM, what would you share?

APPENDIX D

DIMENSION AND INDICATORS OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL MODEL REFORM PROGRAM

Dimension 1: Instructional Excellence and Alignment
1a: All teachers employ effective classroom management and reinforce classroom rules and procedures by positively teaching 1b: Instructional teams develop standards-aligned units of instruction for each subject and grade level 1c: Units of instruction and activities are aligned with AIG goals, ELL student progress, IEP goals, and objectives for all students. 1d: The school implements a tiered instructional system that allows teachers to deliver evidence-based instruction aligned with the individual needs of students across all tiers. 1e: All teachers are attentive to students' emotional states, guide students in managing their emotions, and arrange for supports and interventions when necessary. The school develops and implements consistent, intentional, and ongoing plans to support student transitions for grade-to-grade and level-to-level.
Dimension 2: Leadership Capacity
2a: The district has a District Support and Improvement Team. 2b: A Leadership Team consisting of the principal, teachers who lead the Instructional Teams, and other professional staff meets regularly (at least twice a month) to review the implementation of effective practices. 2c: The school has established a team structure among teachers with specific duties and time for instructional planning. 2d: The principal monitors curriculum and classroom instruction regularly and provides timely, clear, constructive feedback to teachers.
Dimension 3: Professional Capacity
3a: The district/school regularly looks at school performance data and aggregated classroom observation data and uses that data to make decisions about school improvement and professional development needs. 3b: The district/school has established a system of procedures and protocols for recruiting, evaluating, rewarding, and replacing staff.

Dimension 4: Planning and Operational Effectiveness
<p>4a: The district provides technology, training, and support to facilitate the school’s data management needs.</p> <p>4b: The district ensures that key pieces of user-friendly data are available in a timely fashion at the district, school, and classroom levels.</p> <p>4c: The district recruits, trains, supports, and places personnel to competently address the problems of schools in need of improvement.</p> <p>4d: The district intervenes early when a school is not making adequate progress.</p> <p>4e: The district allows school leaders reasonable autonomy to do things differently in order to succeed.</p>
Dimension 5: Families and Community
<p>5a: The school regularly communicates with parents/guardians about its expectations of them and the importance of the curriculum of the home (what parents can do at home to support their children’s learning).</p>