STEPHAN, TODD A., Ed.D. Instructional Practices and Professional Culture in High Growth High Schools. (2017)
Directed by Dr. Carl Lashley. 226 pp.

In a culture of high-stakes testing and accountability, proficiency and growth scores provide a means for judging, labeling, and comparing high schools in North Carolina. As a high school principal, I was motivated to study how public high schools in the Piedmont Triad region were achieving significant student academic growth as reflected in a growth rating of *exceeds expected growth.*

Through the lenses of principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture, this study compared and contrasted the successful practices, structures, routines, and ideas at work in three selected public high schools. I interviewed principals, assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, and teachers. After initial data analysis, I conducted follow-up interviews via email. In addition, I recorded observations based on building tours and informal visits to each school.

Although each school had unique ways of establishing expectations, procedures, and routines, four common themes contributed to their success of academic growth in all students: timely and purposeful feedback, collaboration and collegiality, intentional planning, and high expectations and standards of excellence. Readers can apply the successful practices, structures, ideas, and artifacts from this study to improve their own classrooms or schools.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL

CULTURE IN HIGH GROWTH

HIGH SCHOOLS

by

Todd A. Stephan

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
2017

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale for the Study

The focus of this study was to understand how principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders in high-growth public high schools cultivate student learning. Comparing and contrasting principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture that exist in selected public high schools provided insight into optimizing student potential and turning all students on to learning. Based on practical experience in the field of instructional leadership (as a high school principal), and the reading of scholarly research, each of these four components or lenses defines the core of teaching and learning as it directly contributes to promoting academic growth in all students.

Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

Principal Leadership

Today, instructional leadership practices are aimed at enhancing teachers' professional learning and growth and sharing the responsibilities of instruction (Robinson, 2011). Timperley (2011) argues that teachers' learning and development are dependent on principals' systematic support and their presence close to the everyday working environment. Though most principals have a professional background as teachers and bring their teaching experiences with them to their leadership tasks, it is not

common for them to intervene in classroom practices (Salo, Nyland, & Stjernstrom, 2015). The practice of principals guiding and engaging in teachers' work in the classroom is a delicate matter. There is significant interest in the intentional, goal-oriented practices by which principals relate to teachers' responsibilities for teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2009). Uncovering how principals invest their time and energy to support high quality teaching and learning as well as the resources that they provide was of particular interest in this study. Verbiest (2011), for example, presents instructional leadership as a combination of assumptions and practices, both of which are characterized by effective transformational and distributive leadership. Principals are asked to be consummate team builders who can develop a vision of success for all students, cultivate leadership in others, support the professional growth of teachers, and evaluate data to foster school improvement among many other responsibilities. Those who strive to be instructional leaders need support and structure to accomplish their goals. Principals who are open-minded, creative, and willing to provide opportunities for teachers to lead by example will help foster a positive school climate (Verbiest, 2011).

Teacher Leadership

A teacher instructional leader aims to improve teaching for the purpose of maximizing student learning in the classroom. Teacher instructional leaders perform an array of activities, including conducting professional development workshops, co-planning and modeling effective lessons, observing teaching and providing feedback, collecting and analyzing student data, facilitating dialogue and reflective critique, and promoting shared practices among peers (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010).

In practice, teacher leaders are curriculum experts within their content area, helping to develop common pacing guides and shared formative assessments. Teacher leaders may lead formally through assigned roles but more often informally by speaking about their classroom practices, sharing their expertise, mentoring new teachers, questioning their colleagues, or collaborating on effective classroom practices (Raffanti, 2008). Teacher leaders have an ability to inspire their own students and make time to share ideas and strategies with their colleagues to contribute to positive outcomes for all (Levin & Schrum, 2017). Developing teacher leaders in a supportive school environment is a challenge that often requires collaboration and the assistance of others.

Shared Instructional Decision Making

As Hattie (2012) reminds us, students' innate development and simple exposure to material will naturally cause some growth in a student's achievement over time, even if no instructional intervention takes place. Traditionally, teaching has been an isolated profession, as individual teachers have often prepared, implemented, and evaluated their lessons and their students' learning unassisted (Hobson, 2001). Furthermore, teachers' reflections on their learning in relation to instructional decisions and student learning habitually occur in isolation from peers or other professional supports (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). Research, however, has indicated that effective professional learning occurs in collaboration with others (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2007; Fullan, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) engage in frequent collaborative discussion and reflection about students, activities, assessments, and more. As a

researcher, I was interested in exploring the intricacies of those teaching practices and how teams of teachers were supporting each other in evaluating student progress and examining the relationship between teaching and learning. In my role of principal, I have observed collaboration in PLCs, including unpacking course standards, designing formative assessments, analyzing student work, and reflecting on student assessment results. I have learned that these collaborative components of a PLC are critical to the development of instructional activities that will inspire and motivate student learning (Dufour, 2014).

Beyond the collaborative effort of administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers to share their thoughts and ideas, I am also interested in what drives the decision making within these groups. In an effort to meet the unique needs of all students, how are teachers empowered to gather information and make informed decisions? Who has influence over the procedures and practices related to the vision and mission of the school? In Chapter II, I will discuss shared instructional decision making as it relates to teacher empowerment and teacher efficacy.

Instructional Practices

In an effort to prepare each and every student for a suitable college or career, the classroom teacher assumes an awesome role. It is important that students know exactly what they are learning and why they are learning it. As the researcher, I examined the careful and thoughtful planning and delivery of lessons that led students to academic growth. Knowing that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work in most classrooms, I aimed to dig into how teachers were successfully directly or indirectly instructing

students to maximize their potential. Motivating students to take ownership for their

learning and strive for continual improvement are undoubtedly challenging work.

Good teachers resist the idea of "teaching to the test." But aligning instruction

with assessment is not teaching to the test if that assessment is a valid measure of a

student's performance (Boyles, 2016). Since 2011, 45 states have revised their standards

and raised the levels at which students are considered "proficient" on state assessments

(Peterson, Barrows, & Gift, 2016). That means more rigor and deeper levels of

knowledge practiced across all classrooms. It also means more stress for administrators,

teachers, and students. When teachers ask, "What does depth of knowledge look like on

these new, more rigorous assessments?" and "How do we prepare students for this kind

of thinking?," they are often referred to well-known models like Bloom's Taxonomy,

with its six cognitive levels—remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create

(Armstrong, 2016). Boyles (2016) cautions school leaders and teachers that guidance on

such models has often been too general in nature and sometimes even misleading. She

believes we need a better way to teach for depth of knowledge and prepare our students

for today's standards-based assessments.

Research conducted for the national nonprofit organization, What Kids Can Do,

revealed a disturbing pattern: "The most significant learning young people described was

usually not happening in the classroom" (Cushman, 2013, p. 38). When students spoke

of what they were getting really good at, the accomplishments they spoke of—in

athletics, the arts, in community action—mostly took place outside of school (Cushman,

2013). In contrast, what young people said about their daily school experiences often

seemed "pale, passive, and dull" (Cushman, 2013, p. 38). Students rarely spoke of new ideas they grappled with or exciting projects they had accomplished at school. As evidence of academic success, students often cited grades given for work they had largely forgotten. Students experience a rush of excitement when they start to understand some hard, new thing—and they want more of it. Cushman (2013) challenges teachers by asking, "What instructional practices and particular learning activities created by teachers are lighting fires in the mind?" (p. 39). As an educator, I admire the great work that teachers do and am often fascinated by their success knowing that not all students think alike or learn at the same pace. Without a positive relationship with an adult or the assurance of feeling welcome in a classroom, motivating a student to be the best that they can be is an uphill battle.

In Chapter II, I will discuss the instructional practices of a passionate, effective, and accomplished teachers. I will examine good teaching, the potential benefits for online learning, lesson plan relevancy, and how to get students to think on a higher level. Although there may not be consensus among researchers or definitive answers to promoting academic growth in students, I will explore the practices, support structures, and other factors contributing to student success.

Professional Culture

In the current era of high-stakes testing, the teaching and learning environment has taken on new meaning in many school settings. Principals, assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, department chairs, academic coaches, and teachers share the responsibility of empowering instructional leadership and student success. These

instructional leaders engage in collaborative inquiry with teachers, create opportunities for reflection, discourse, and professional growth, and strive to develop authentic professional learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Reitzug, 1994).

A desire to meet the unique needs of all students, no matter what their starting point, requires a safe, nurturing, yet challenging environment. Shaping a school culture is a complex process with many different personalities in many different roles all in the same building. I was eager to study how high schools were finding a balance between stretching a student's learning and maintaining a caring, supportive climate.

Chapter II will provide details from the literature defining a healthy organizational culture and what it takes to develop a positive working environment. The interactions and behaviors of adults working with other adults, students working with adults, and students working with students all contribute to school culture. I will examine how that culture is created.

Accountability Models and Getting to the Core of Teaching and Learning

I studied how public high schools met the unique needs of all students achieving high academic growth from one year to the next and how faculties worked on behalf of all students using the best strategies to promote academic growth and student success. As a current high school principal, I seek to ensure good teaching in all classrooms all of the time. I am also a realist though and recognize the challenge of creating that culture of high expectations in which learning thrives. In an effort to be transparent and discuss

part of my motivation to conduct this study, I will shed light on the high school where I work and include personal core values that I encourage among our staff.

The Principal in Me

As a high school principal, I want to be proactive and make sound instructional choices to provide opportunities for all students to succeed. Using appropriate resources and supporting teachers to strategically address the unique needs of all students is critically important. It is no secret that some students enter class with prerequisite knowledge and skills that enable them to earn an A or a B with little effort, whereas others are challenged to make adequate progress when putting forth their best effort (Morgan, 2014). Differentiating instruction and supporting the unique needs of a variety of students from differing backgrounds is an arduous task (Morgan, 2014). Assessing students and gathering evidence of learning to ensure students are mastering material takes time and effort. Providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning over a period of time counters the fact that deadlines are critical to the educational process. Changing teachers from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset is a challenge that I am willing to invest in as an educational leader (Dweck, 2006). A common misconception equates a growth mindset with student effort. Students come from a variety of backgrounds with different learning styles. Getting to know students on a personal level and figuring out what will support their learning requires commitment and dedication. A student working hard will not automatically equate to academic success. Scaffolding to help provide the necessary support will motivate students to grow academically through application and experience (Dweck, 2006).

As an educational leader, I encourage teachers to support students thriving on challenges and setbacks with the focus on personal growth and learning. As educators, we need to focus on knowing students' strengths and weaknesses, being cognizant of their current achievement levels, and working with them to improve their level of understanding will foster positive academic development rather than finding a reason or excuse for why some students cannot learn.

At Western Alamance High School, located in Elon, NC, where I am the principal, not all of these relevant practices are working effectively to promote academic success in all students. Hence, my interest in this research. Some professional learning communities are functioning better than others, some teachers are analyzing student data to differentiate instruction, and some teachers are tweaking their lesson plans to better align with state standards. With an emphasis on accountability in recent years and prominent research findings that school leaders have an indirect, yet considerable effect on student learning outcomes, principals have increasingly received pressure to enhance student achievement (Bloom & Owens, 2013; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). I am not averse to this pressure as a high school principal. I see myself as effective in organizational and indirect instructional management but less effective in guiding teachers in instructional matters, which has also led me to this research.

Accountability and Testing in North Carolina

School performance grades. In 2013 the North Carolina General Assembly required the inclusion of School Performance Grades as part of the North Carolina School Report Cards. Included in the school report card, each public school receives an

A-F letter grade. The grade is based 80% on a school's achievement score (calculated using a composite method based on the sum of points earned by a school on all of the indicators measured for that school), and 20% on students' academic growth (compares the actual performance of the school's students to their expected performance based on their prior testing performance). The final A-F letter grade is based on a 15-point scale, such that an A would range from 85 to 100, B from 70 to 84, etc. High schools use the following indicators to calculate the achievement score:

- End-of-Course Math 1, English II, and Biology;

- The ACT (percent of students who score 17 or above);

- ACT WorkKeys (percent of students who achieve a Silver Certificate or better);

- Math Course Rigor (percent of student who successfully complete Math III);

- and the 4-year Graduation Rate (NCDPI, 2015).

The high school's growth score is generated by using the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS). EVAAS is a value-added growth model that uses end of grade and end of course assessment data to measure the amount of growth students make in a year. A predictive-based model, given students' prior testing history, the difference between students' expected scores and observed scores are calculated as a measure of growth (NCDPI, 2015). Through EVAAS, however, teacher effectiveness focused on the growth of students, not on their proficiency level (NCDPI, 2016). The NCDPI (2016) position holds that a teacher can help students grow at high rates even though they do not

reach proficiency. Furthermore, DPI leaders agree that effective educators can push students to make progress regardless of where they started.

Education Value-Added Assessment System. In addition to growth measures, EVAAS also provides data and tools for teachers to improve student learning and to reflect and improve on their own effectiveness (NCDPI, 2015). Recently, through EVAAS, our high school (Western Alamance High School) received an average growth index value that was less than -2, providing evidence that on average, students in the school did not meet the expected growth standard. By definition, this index value was the growth measure divided by its standard error, and it provided a signal as to whether the progress estimate was significantly different from the expected growth (NCDPI, 2016). In simpler terms, over the past three years, our high school went from exceeds expected growth (growth index value more than two standard deviations above the mean), to meets expected growth (growth index value greater than two standard deviations below the mean and less than two standard deviations above the mean), and most recently to does not meet expected growth (growth index value less than two standard deviations below the mean). EVAAS examines the impact of teachers, schools, and districts on the learning of their students in specific courses, grades, and subjects. As it pertains to high school, students who were assessed in the End-of-Course examinations (EOC's) in math 1, English 2, and biology account for the average growth index. Based on data from the three tested subjects, a disconnect exists somewhere causing Western Alamance High School's 3-year downward trend in EVAAS growth status. Exploring how principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders in high growth schools support a

culture of academic growth and high expectations in all students will benefit me and other educational leaders throughout all high schools in North Carolina by providing insights into how to cultivate student academic growth.

From a personal perspective, I noticed that many of the high school students meet a certain academic standard or the necessary benchmark score but are not achieving to their highest potential. Looking more closely at principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture, as they specifically relate to academic growth in all students from one year to the next, benefits my personal and professional capacity as a high school principal, and similarly, that of other building leaders in a comparable role.

Rationale for Examining High Growth in Public High Schools

State Superintendent June Atkinson (2015) stated in her Principals' Biweekly Message, "More than 72% of North Carolina schools met or exceeded growth during last year, a strong sign of the commitment of teachers and students to learning" (p. 1). I aimed to examine the leadership behaviors, shared instructional decision making, instructional leadership practices, and professional culture of selected high schools to determine how schools provided ample support for teachers to promote student academic growth from one year to the next. Although the EVAAS growth status was based solely on three specific end-of-course tests (math 1, English 2, and biology), I implore our staff to take collective responsibility for the academic growth and achievement of each and every student.

Through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and instructional leaders, I explored how instructional leaders were motivating students to achieve academic gains from one year to the next. What are dynamic, dedicated teachers and instructional leaders doing to foster student success in their high school on a consistent basis? Leadership, shared decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture cannot be overlooked in the framework for teaching and learning in high schools that are consistently showing significant academic gains in students from one year to the next.

This study benefits building administrators and teachers of all public high schools that are rated similarly to the accountability model established by the NCDPI. Exploring and analyzing how teachers and instructional leaders are supporting school-wide high expectations, building teacher capacity, fostering positive relationships with students, and sharing in the decision-making process will motivate educators to reflect on their current leadership and teaching methods to help gauge what is working effectively and what needs change.

Problem Statement

Although many students may not outperform their peers, they can outperform their previous performance. Similarly, although many students may demonstrate acceptable achievement, there is often room for further individual growth (Martin, 2015). The problem I investigated was how high schools in the Piedmont Triad region were consistently meeting a status of exceeds growth (an EVAAS growth rating of more than two standard deviations above the mean). Personally, I aimed to improve my own leadership capacity as a high school principal. Professionally, I hoped to gain expertise

to better support our high school's effort to meet or exceed expected growth. I focused on gathering personal accounts, insight, and rich description from educators in three high growth high schools as to how to achieve high academic growth in all students.

Research Questions

To support what cultivated high academic growth in all students from one year to the next in three selected high growth high schools, research focused on principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture. The research questions for this study are:

1. How did participants perceive that principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture each play a role in achieving high growth in high schools?

2. How did principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture synthesize to influence the performance of principals, teachers, and students in high schools that achieve high growth?

As the researcher, I aimed to address each of the four critical components in Research Question 1 within each of the three high schools and how each factored in to their high growth. Then, in Research Question 2, I examined how the four components were intertwined to positively impact academic growth in all students.

Introduction to the Methodology

I selected three Piedmont Triad high schools with a demographically similar makeup to the school of which I am the principal. According to the National Center for

Educational Statistics (NCES), Western Alamance High School was given the locale

rural-fringe, based on the combination of mostly rural and suburban school surroundings.

Following the 2014-2015 school year, Western Alamance High School obtained a school

grade of C – 63, had a growth status of not met, 51.1% of the students scored proficient

on the EOC exams math 1, biology, and English 2, and 26% of the student body was

eligible for free or reduced price lunches, which indicates that their families have

incomes below the poverty level. Approximately 70% of the student population

consisted of Caucasian students, and roughly 30% of the student population were

minorities, including Asian, Latino, and African-American students totaling roughly

1,200 students.

To maintain similarity to Western Alamance High School, the three selected high

schools served 900-1,500 students, had a free and reduced lunch percentage ranging from

25% to 40%, had a minority population of 25%-40% of the total school population,

aligned closest to a rural-fringe high school, and maintained stability in the role of

principal. After narrowing down the selected high schools that exceeded expected

growth for at least two consecutive years and fit the profiled demographic ranges, I

contacted the school districts requesting access and permission to conduct the research.

Personnel at each high school were interviewed about principal and teacher leadership,

shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture that

yielded high growth in all students. After initial data analysis, follow-up interviews took

place via email. In addition, observational notes were taken based on building tours or

informal visits throughout each facility. The purpose of the study was to examine

principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture with three high schools to identify what principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders are doing to promote high growth in all students.

There is a great deal of research on instructional leadership (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Fullan, 2006; Hallinger, 2011; Hattie, 2015; Levin & Schrum, 2017), but uncovering how and why high schools are doing what they are doing to achieve high academic growth will provide data in a less-explored arena specific to the academic growth of high school students. I conducted a qualitative interview study based on three high schools in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. Sixty- to 90-minute interviews took place at each school's site with four to seven principals, teachers, and other key instructional support personnel. I selected interviewees with the help of each building principal and participants volunteered to be a part of the study. I audio recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews. Follow-up interviews via email took place after initial data were analyzed. To rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants said and did, member checks took place to verify participant data and conclusions were accurate. Analysis of the data included identifying patterns and themes that characterize the data through the process of open coding in addition to a priori coding based on the conceptual framework as depicted at the end of Chapter II. I wrote research memos to record my thoughts in a journal including impressions, reflections, and interpretations that factored into the analysis of data and the development of findings and implications.

Summary and Overview

I had personal, practical, and intellectual goals for conducting this qualitative study. Personally, as a high school principal, I wanted to gain insight into the leadership, shared decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture that exists in other high schools that are achieving high academic growth in all students similar to the one in which I work. Practically, as an influencer and change leader, I wanted to help motivate our teachers to create engaging classroom spaces that provide all students an opportunity to thrive academically. Intellectually, I wanted to understand how public high schools are meeting high academic growth and best answer the research questions for the benefit of instructional leaders and practitioners across the State of North Carolina and elsewhere.

Identifying effective teachers and teaching practices has driven a great deal of educational research over the past century, yet agreement on effectiveness criteria has remained elusive (von der Embse & Putwain, 2015). Decades of research have consistently supported a strong relationship between high-quality classroom instruction and student academic success (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Four areas of the literature drove my research on how public high schools were cultivating high growth in all students: principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture. In Chapter II, I organized a review of the literature according to the four aforementioned topics. I aimed to construct a narrative essay that integrates, synthesizes, and uncovers the significant thinking and research on the aforementioned frameworks. I hoped to set

the stage for what principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional cultures are contributing to academic achievement in all students.

Through in-depth interviews and informal observations of three high schools, I explored how each is supporting high academic growth in all students. Chapter III details the methodology, including each school setting, the participants, means of data collection, and data analysis, as well as an argument for the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter IV, the findings chapter, provides a rich description of each school, the participants, and how the instructional leaders are collectively motivating and inspiring students to achieve academic growth from one year to the next. Data reveal the effective instructional strategies and practices that are leading to school success as well as the thoughts and reflections from the participants supporting the ways in which they are successfully meeting the unique needs of all students.

Finally, Chapter V captures the themes that emerged from each of the three high schools, a synthesis of principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture. The collective thoughts and practices from each school summarize the most important strategies and instructional supports leading to academic growth in all students. Sharing that message with other high school principals, teachers, and instructional leaders may benefit their personal and professional growth.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to examine three public high schools in the Piedmont Triad region and how principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture intertwine to foster high academic growth in all students. There is a fair amount of literature that identifies specific instructional strategies proven to be effective, supporting a strong relationship between high-quality instruction and student academic success (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2012; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Research also suggests that teachers vary widely in use and application of these practices (Munoz & Chang, 2007). The question remains, however, as to what and how often teachers engaged in effective practices (Reddy, Fabiano, Barbarash, & Dudek, 2012).

My research focused on how principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture foster academic improvement in all students from one year to the next. As a principal and a graduate student, I stay abreast of literature focused on student performance. Through my own reading, scholarly research, and practical experience as a high school principal, I focused on four critical factors that promote student academic growth in high schools. I set out to explore how each of these four components contributed to the academic growth of all students. Along the way, I realized that in addition to each component having its

own implications for student academic growth, the four components merge to have a powerful effect on the performance of personnel in each school.

Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

Principals and teachers working in harmony with a student-centered approach to instructional leadership positively influence academic progress (Levin and Schrum, 2017). This section explores how principals and teachers, leading and supporting each and every student in a classroom make a difference.

Principal Instructional Leadership

In education, it is difficult to get really good at any one initiative because there are rarely only one or two. Masci, Cuddapah, and Pajak (2008) summarize some of the obstacles educational leaders face, stating,

> The confluence of federal mandates, budget cutbacks, increased standardization, high-stakes testing, greater awareness of students' diversities, technological advances, and political uncertainty has resulted in the 'perfect storm' for our secondary public school administrators and teachers. (p. 57)

The same authors proposed that secondary school principals could benefit from thinking of themselves not only as agents of change but also as agents of stability who are the "gyroscopes" of their schools, helping to find and maintain the organizational balance necessary for concerted and sustained success (Masci et al., 2008).

Instructional leadership. Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) believe school leaders are capable of having significant positive effects on student learning. The authors also argue that it is widely understood that the effects of school leadership on student achievement are largely indirect. Answering the "how" questions means searching for

the most powerful mediators of leadership influence on students, which include school

goal setting processes and goal consensus, school culture and climate, decision-making

processes, programs and instruction, resources, teachers' expectations, commitment and

attitudes toward change, instructional organization, sense of community, and an orderly

environment (Leithwood et al., 2010).

With increased pressure for all students to meet proficiency standards and show

adequate progress on state assessments, the role of the principal cannot be simply one of

building manager. Instructional leadership is a vital part of a principal's repertoire. The

principal is the overarching leader of a school and served two primary functions: to

provide direction and to exercise influence (Perilla, 2014).

> The leadership role of a principal can be summarized with five main tasks:
> Provide the school community with a vision of academic success for students;
> create a climate that is safe, welcoming, cooperative, and that places student
> success as its top priority; develop the staff around them by distributing their
> leadership and thus creating buy-in; provide instructional leadership in the form
> of direct coaching of teachers by instituting systems that facilitate improving
> teachers' instructional practice; and set up systems and processes to collect and
> analyze data in order to drive school improvement. (Mendels, 2012, p. 54)

In addition, principals help teachers improve their practice by supporting learning

communities that promote curriculum-related conversation and collaboration in lesson

plan design. To help define the factors with which principals should be familiar to

monitor school conditions and improve student achievement, Marzano's (2003)

framework for *What Works in Schools*, listed five key factors:

1. Guaranteed and viable curriculum;
2. Challenging goals and effective feedback;

3. Parent and community involvement;

4. Safe and orderly environment;

5. Collegiality and professionalism. (p. 15)

The contemporary principal's role as an instructional leader engaged in standards-based school improvement has evolved into one in which every stakeholder is empowered to participate in the learning process. Principals must know when to be a manager and when to be a leader. This type of leadership is difficult for some individuals because its very nature risks losing control of the school (Barth, 2001). Noddings (2003) maintains that effective school leadership must include measures that allow for accountability and endorse progress of learning even as they meet the individual needs of students and promote learning that meets the needs of the whole child. The principal's ability to meet these two responsibilities is associated with the influences that they have over the operation of the school. This included their impact on curriculum, staffing, and school environment issues (Choy, Henke, Alt, Medrich, & Bobbitt, 1993).

Hallinger (2005) bemoans the continuing research focusing on the principal as the main variable in improved student achievement. Similarly, Coplan (2001) explains that "two decades into the current age of school reform, one can argue that we have reached the point where aggregate expectations for the principalship are so exorbitant that they exceed the limits of what might reasonably be expected from one person" (pp. 528–533). All in all, principals can no longer be strictly managers; rather, they are relied on to be instructional and community leaders. Success for all students depends on principal leadership that (a) holds clear expectations and strategies for implementation of curricular goals (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001); (b) actively participates in the selection of teachers

who believe in building capacity through collaboration and the primacy of the school's mission (Cole-Henderson, 2000); (c) use data to monitor school progress, identify problems, and propose solutions (LaPointe & Davis, 2006); and (d) understands the forces of change that can stall efforts going forward (Leana & Pil, 2006). Principals must be keenly aware of the school's individual classroom conditions and be available and knowledgeable of funding strategies to provide resources necessary for teachers to encourage and improve student outcomes.

Walkthrough protocols. Frequent classroom observations allow principals to see firsthand what is going on in classrooms, better positioning themselves to monitor instruction, provide support to teachers, and influence the instructional climate of their schools (Ing, 2009). As part of a cycle of continuous improvement, teacher walk-throughs utilize real-time classroom data that teachers identify as important for improving their practice, ultimately leading to improved student learning (Feeney, 2014). A teacher walk-through protocol is an embedded form of professional development that uses a systematic approach that incorporates observing teacher professional growth standards, Common Core State Standards, and 21st Century skills in the classroom (Feeney, 2014). Through the classroom walk-through process, teachers identify an important problem of practice; observe other teachers; collect, analyze, and reflect on data; and work collaboratively to focus on the next level of work (Curtis & City, 2009). Principals create and implement walk-through protocols to improve teaching and learning. Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2010) made the case that research studies on instructional leadership, professional learning communities, and adult learning reveal the

importance of classroom walk-throughs in concert with other improvement strategies. Further, the same authors referenced a 2005 meta-analysis study by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty that linked strong instructional leadership and the benefits of walkthroughs with five behaviors: improved conversation among teachers and students, ongoing discussion of the current research among faculty and staff, enhanced monitoring of the effectiveness of school practices on student learning, enhanced understanding of the school culture, and increased visibility in the classroom.

Despite research done by these luminaries in the field of instructional leadership, many principals still perpetuate the image of a remote bureaucrat. The more effective leader, however, engages in classroom walk-throughs observing and debriefing on a consistent basis. Teachers work side-by-side with administrators learning from one another with the common goal of bettering the teaching and learning process.

Summary of principal instructional leadership. The principal of the school is the overarching leader capable of having significant positive effects on student learning. No longer a building manager, the principal establishes clear expectations and strategies for high quality teaching and learning, recruits and retains passionate and dedicated teachers, uses data to monitor school progress, identifies problems and proposes solutions, and builds community and capacity through collaboration and the sharing of ideas. In addition, high visibility holds teachers accountable with walkthrough protocols in place to provide timely and purposeful feedback to improve student learning. Principals need to be aware of teacher's needs, providing the support and structure to encourage improved student learning.

Teacher Leadership

In recent years, there has been a change in leadership thinking from an emphasis on one-person leadership, perceived to be the role of the principal, to the potential of shared leadership (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003; Jackson, 2000; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lambert, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003). In school organizations, one of the manifestations of shared leadership is the development of teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2003). There has been an increasing recognition that the most effective teacher provides a powerful knowledge base for driving change and bringing about improvement in schools (Fullan, 2007; Murphy, 2005).

Harrison and Killion (2007) believe the ways teachers could lead are as varied as the teachers themselves. "Teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support school and student success. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve" (Harrison & Killion, 2007, p. 74). More specifically, formal teachers gain their legitimacy through assigned roles or positions (e.g., department chairs, mentor teachers), whereas informal teacher leaders gain their influence through earning respect from students and colleagues through their expertise and practice (e.g., teachers taking the initiative to solve instructional problems, model new instructional strategies, or articulate visions for improvement; Lai & Cheung, 2015). Murphy (2005) highlights formal teacher leadership as a planned, competitive and individualistic enterprise focusing predominantly on administrative activities and managerial functions; and informal teacher leadership as an emergent, collaborative, and collective enterprise focusing predominantly on issues related to teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, there is little consensus around what constitutes teacher leadership (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Smylie & Denny, 1990; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders promote changes in instruction, take on administrative duties, or hold a combination of positions. There is no consistent definition of what a teacher leader does and we "lack a comprehensive view of what teacher leadership is and how it works" (Lord & Miller, 2000, p. 9). York-Barr and Duke (2004) suggest that teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increasing student learning and achievement.

In practice, teacher leaders lead formally by taking on assigned roles or lead informally by speaking about their classroom practices, sharing their expertise, asking questions of colleagues, mentoring new teachers, and modeling how teachers can collaborate on issues of practice (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006; Raffanti, 2008).

Development of teacher leaders. On the basis of their work in schools focused on developing teacher leaders, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) suggest factors that influence a teacher's readiness to assume the roles and responsibilities of a teacher leader. These factors include excellent professional teaching skills, a clear and well-developed personal philosophy of education, being in a career stage that enables one to give to others, having an interest in adult development, and being in a personal life stage that allows one time and energy to assume a position of teacher leadership.

Raffanti (2008) identifies three key areas relevant to understanding the roles and experiences of teacher leaders: context, skills, and challenges. Teacher leaders need to

consider the context and their personal situation to be sure: (a) their efforts will be appreciated and supported; (b) they have the skills to do the things they want to contribute to the school, the organization, or the profession; and (c) they have the time and energy to take on challenges that may occur while they are leading (Raffanti, 2008).

Instructional leaders believe that the success of teachers rests on their learning, their attitude about welcoming and learning from their errors, working collaboratively, and becoming metacognitive about their teaching so that they can continue to improve (Levin & Schrum, 2017). To do this, instructional leaders create "a school climate in which everybody learns, learning is shared, and critique isn't just tolerated, but welcomed" (Hattie, 2015, p. 39). Instructional leaders do this by (a) establishing clear goals that align with positive student outcomes; (b) ensuring there are teachers and appropriate resources to support those goals; (c) actively coordinating the curriculum and evaluating the teaching in their schools, which includes being sure the progress of students is monitored; (d) actively promoting and participating in both formal and informal learning opportunities for teachers; and (e) creating a safe and supportive environment so that goals can be attained (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Instructional leaders know that they could not do this alone, however, requiring collaboration, positive relationships, support, and trust for the good of the whole and the success of the students (Angelle, 2007).

Overall, the research on teacher leadership effects on colleagues and their classrooms and school-level practices suggests that school culture is a considerable obstacle to overcome if the potential positive effects are to be realized. Professional

norms of isolation, individualism, and egalitarianism challenge the emergence of teacher

leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Based on a small study of teacher leaders, Griffin

(1995) suggests,

> Teachers in most schools are unaware of the work their colleagues do with
> students and have come to believe that their peers' teaching is acceptable at least
> and exemplary at best based on the absence of evidence to the contrary. This
> evidence is unlikely to emerge as long as the privileges of privacy continue to be
> the norms of schools . . . Adding to this veil is the fact that schools are non-
> confrontative social organizations, at least in terms of how teachers interact with
> one another . . . For decades, it was unthinkable that teachers, as members of a
> professional class, would call attention to the shortcomings of other teachers lest
> such attention would be generalized to the entire group. (p. 44)

In their study on the development of teacher leaders, York-Barr and Duke (2004)

concluded that for the concept of teacher leadership to be effective, leadership must

emerge from many individuals within an organization and not simply vested in a handful

of formally recognized leaders. The most effective teacher leaders have backgrounds as

accomplished teachers, and they are respected by their colleagues. By developing

trusting and collaborative relationships, teacher leaders can influence their colleagues.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) also suggest that principals play a pivotal role in the success

of teacher leadership by actively supporting the development of teachers, maintaining

open channels of communication, and aligning structures and resources to support the

leadership work of teachers.

Teacher instructional leaders. Harrison and Killion (2007) describe an

instructional teacher leader as one who helps colleagues implement effective teaching

strategies, which includes ideas for differentiating instruction or planning lessons in

partnership with fellow teachers. Instructional teacher leaders study research-based classroom strategies (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) and explore which instructional methodologies are appropriate for the school with the potential to share findings with colleagues. Thus, the work of an instructional teacher leader aims to improve teaching for the purpose of increasing student learning. As such, teachers, in interaction with one another, have the potential to lead instructional improvement efforts despite a lack of positional authority (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010).

In a report by the U.S. Department of Education resulting from the National Teacher Forum, Paulu and Winters (1998) asserted that teachers were critical to education reform because they were the ones who had "front line knowledge of classroom issues and the culture of schools, and they understand the support they need to do their jobs well" (p. 7). Teacher expertise is at the foundation of increasing teacher quality and advancements in teaching and learning. This expertise becomes more widely available when accomplished teachers model effective instructional practices, encourage sharing of best practices, mentor new teachers, and collaborate with teaching colleagues. Through such interactions, teacher leaders break down teacher isolation and help create a more professional work environment (Barth, 2001; Hart, 1995).

Effective teacher leaders understand content standards such as the Common Core, and they know how to use the standards to plan instruction (Killion, Harrison, Bryan, & Clifton, 2012). Teacher leaders as curriculum specialists use common pacing charts and develop shared formative assessments. In addition, they help other teachers understand and integrate curricula across disciplines to reinforce learning outcomes. This is often

accomplished by sharing instructional resources, including Web sites, instructional

materials, articles, assessment tools, books, or other resources to use with students.

Lieberman and Miller (2004) made this point about teacher leaders facilitating learning:

> When teachers cast off the mantle of technical and managed worker and assume
> new roles as researchers, meaning makers, scholars, and inventors, they expand
> the vision of who they are and what they do. They come to view themselves and
> are viewed by others as intellectuals engaged in inquiry about teaching and
> learning. Central to this expanded vision of teaching is the idea that teachers are
> also leaders, educators who can make a difference in schools and schooling now
> and in the future. (p. 11)

Instructional teacher leaders possess the procedural knowledge necessary to

facilitate collective instructional improvement. Procedural knowledge includes knowing

how to deliver content to teachers in a way that promotes collaboration, dialogue, and

trust (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010). Lord, Cress, and Miller (2008) found that teacher

leaders essentially show and tell teachers how to change—they show through direct

modeling, and they tell through planning and advising.

Effects of teacher leadership. Summarizing the work of York-Barr and Duke

(2004), the most consistently documented positive effects of teacher leadership are on the

teacher leaders themselves, supporting the belief that leading and learning are

interrelated. Teacher leadership work that is focused at the classroom level of practice

(e.g., implementing instructional strategies) is likely to show student effects more readily

than work focused at the organizational level (e.g., participating in site-based decision

making; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teacher leaders can also be catalysts for change, visionaries who are "never content with the status quo but rather always looking for a better way" (Larner, 2004, p. 32). Teachers who take on the role of a catalyst for change feel secure in their own work and have a strong commitment to continual improvement. As Fullan (1994) stated, "Teacher leadership is not for a few; it is for all" (p. 115). However, according to a Metlife Survey of American Teachers (2013), job satisfaction has dropped to the lowest level in over 25 years. Given that successful teacher leadership requires collaboration with others and that teacher leaders both need and deserve opportunities to develop their leadership skills, these findings present a dilemma for the future of teacher leadership.

Levin and Schrum (2017) argue that the teacher leadership discussion is more about changing the way people think about what teachers can do, how teachers want opportunities to do, and teachers' desire to make a difference during their career. Berry, Byrd, and Wieder (2013) describe a teacher leader called a teacherpreneur, or "innovative leader who leads but doesn't leave" (p. xv). Teacherpreneurs are classroom experts who not only teach regularly but also make time to generate and share their ideas about education through curriculum projects, writing blogs, creating websites, mentoring other teachers, or leading professional development. This kind of teacher leadership requires creative thinking and support from school and district leaders and opens minds to what the future of teacher leadership might look like (Berry et al., 2013). Those who strive to be strong instructional leaders need to be provided "a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high expectations for students" (Robinson et

al., 2008, p. 638). Further, those focused on instructional leadership contribute to positive student outcomes, which every teacher and instructional leader should aim to do.

Summary of teacher instructional leadership. Teacher leadership is not about any one person or any one approach to instruction. It is about relationships, collaboration, support, and trust with staff working together for the betterment of the school and the success of the students. Teacher instructional leaders have expertise that they have honed in their classrooms that can be shared with others. Experts in their curriculum, teacher leaders effectively facilitate learning and strive to continually get better to meet the unique needs of all students.

Summary of Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

Principal and teacher instructional leadership practices provide direction and exercise influence in a variety of ways. Principals establish a vision for academic excellence placing student success as a priority. Principals empower staff to develop teacher leaders helping to create buy-in, provide instructional leadership through direct coaching, and set up systems to foster collaboration and processes for teachers to collect and analyze student data to drive school improvement.

Similarly, the work of a teacher leader aims to improve teaching for the purpose of increasing student learning. Teacher leaders are curriculum experts, willing to conduct professional development workshops, co-plan and model lessons, observe teaching and provide feedback, collect and analyze data, and promote shared practices among their peers. In both cases, principal and teacher leadership are often driven by the fact that

these educational leaders are never content with the status quo, always looking to find ways to improve and positively impact student learning.

Shared Instructional Decision Making

Not all research scholars agree that the principal overseeing and managing teachers is the pivotal variable in school achievement. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) recognize that secondary schools are the weakest in the educational chain and need specific support systems. In addition, Balfanz and MacIver (2000) warn that it is risky to place too much faith in one lone leader for whole school improvement.

Today's leader must trust her/himself and the school community. This leader expands participation in decision making throughout the school with a goal to widen the circle of "us," making the organization ever more inclusive. The principal does not need to be the sole source of good ideas. Rather, the principal welcomes challenge and relishes debate because that is the best way to discover new possibilities for the entire school community (Shapiro & Gross, 2016).

Over the past several decades, a new model of interdependence in schools has emerged. Margaret Wheatley (2000) describes the new approach as one in which "people organize together to accomplish more, not less" (p. 340). She also says, "Behind every organizing impulse is the realization that by joining with others we can accomplish something important we could not accomplish alone" (Wheatley, 2000, p. 340). As Charlotte Roberts writes in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994), "To re-energize, redefine, or re-establish the school's direction so that it provides opportunities for all students to succeed, there must be a collective

responsibility for strengthening relationships and for improved academic achievement"
(p. 231).

School reform efforts place principals at the forefront of the work required for
schools to improve. Increased pressure to meet school improvement goals, provide
individualized and effective instruction, and produce evidence of student learning make
the job of the school leader more complex than ever before (Larsen & Reickhoff, 2014).
Research continues to focus on the leader's role in alignment with effective outcomes,
but principals are not able to influence such change alone (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).
Continued emphasis is placed on developing structures for sharing leadership and
allowing others to be part of the decision-making process.

The principal's impact on learning can be evidenced by direct and indirect
leadership behaviors. Developing leadership in others is an example of indirect
instructional leadership (Larsen & Rieckhoff, 2014). Additional indirect impacts include
fostering professional learning communities, defined by involvement of key stakeholders
in decision making, and focusing on improving instruction and sharing leadership
(Wahlstrom & Louis, 2010). Shared leadership implies shared responsibility for problem
identification, solutions, and actions. Further literature that supports academic
improvement in high schools points to two key factors: instructional improvement and
structural changes that personalize learning (Quint, 2008).

The critical work of schools is done through relationships among people. These
relationships need to be nurtured and attended to so that conversations move beyond
collegiality to collaboration and a commitment to improving one's craft. William D.

Greenfield (2005) wrote, "The challenge for a school leader is to spark and sustain such a dialogue and to work with and through teachers to develop a shared commitment to implementing the desired practices effectively" (p. 249). Not all teachers have the personal resources—interest, energy, commitment, and willingness to collaborate—that participation requires. Teachers who do become involved in participatory decision making, however, appear to derive benefits from the experience and are also most likely to use the opportunity to improve their instruction and, ultimately, student performance (Smylie, 1994).

A shared leadership model of governance means principals seek out others in their school to build partnerships, tap their strengths, and jointly move the vision forward (Burgess & Bates, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement's (2001) High Performing Learning Community Project, high-performing and equitable schools embrace five core principles:

1. a shared vision;

2. challenging curriculum and engaged student learning;

3. learning community;

4. supportive organizational structures;

5. proactive community relations.

Highly effective schools don't just choose one or two of these core principles as a focus; rather, they understand the interdependence of the five. Fostering a collaborative culture creating a community of collective responsibility among teachers, administrators,

and other school leaders ensures improvement in instruction and student learning (Levin & Schrum, 2017).

Based on both qualitative and quantitative empirical research, Kouzes and Posner (2016) identified five effective leadership practices that elicit peak performance from organizations. The practices identified were "model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart" (p. 18). Each of these practices show the critical nature of the relationship between the school leader and followers. By sharing power, the building leader creates a feeling of influence and ownership in the success of the organization. According to Sergiovanni (1994), leaders create a sense of covenant by cultivating followers' capacity to be successful. This sense of covenant increases the followers' commitment to organizational goals and loyalty to the leader.

The principal plays a significant role in creating an effective school. In discussing the principal's role in restructuring schools, Murphy (1994) states that the principal could be characterized as delegating responsibilities, creating collaborative decision-making climates based on shared vision, providing information and resources, and developing teachers. The importance of the role of the principal as a change agent and instructional leader consistently appears in the research on change and effective schools. Fullan (1991) states that "all major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the principal strongly influences the likelihood of change" (p. 76). Effective principals foster leadership among followers and create structures through which they may practice leadership. Reitzug (1994) states that the empowering principal moves from directing

subordinates on how to perform a task to facilitating self-examination of practices. He further argues the empowering principal must practice "problematizing" (p. 304)— identifying practices that must be more closely critiqued through the framing of the proper questions. Tomorrow's principal must create a culture which embraces collaboration and shared governance.

It is apparent that building leadership, professional learning communities, specific classroom resources, practices, and the culture and climate of a school all contribute to the academic achievement of students. How each fit in to successfully meeting the needs of all learners to grow academically from one year to the next, however, is still up for debate and discussion. No one person can accomplish all that is needed to run a school well—teachers and other curriculum support personnel play a crucial role in supporting a collaborative effort to improve student achievement.

Teacher Empowerment

Strong school performance depends on teachers who are not only genuinely empowered, but also who focus that empowerment collectively on the quality of teaching and student learning (Marks & Louis, 1999). Such effective empowerment, as argued by Marks and Louis (1999) both depends upon and enhances school capacity for organizational learning. The researchers characterize organizational learning in schools as a culture built around the ongoing social processing of knowledge to produce a shared and guiding vision for high-quality work among teachers, students, and administrators. This school capacity for organizational learning includes supportive school structure, facilitative leadership, shared commitment and collaborative activity, the inflow of

knowledge and skills, and a system for ensuring feedback and accountability (Marks & Louis, 1999). Marks and Louis (1999) summarize by stating, "schools where the capacity for organizational learning is strong, teachers will exercise high levels of empowerment. In schools where the capacity is weak, teachers will exercise little collective influence" (p. 715).

Squire-Kelly (2012) believes that empowerment is allowing the teacher to be an active participant in the instructional decisions of the school recognizing teachers as the experts about teaching and learning issues. She concludes:

> That if teachers feel empowered because they have control over integral parts of their job; or do to the fact that they are actively involved in decision making; or they believe that they are able to differentiate for all students; are well respected by their peers and the community they serve; are allowed to grow professionally; and they believe that they have influence over their work environment, they will be more effective and this should have an impact on student achievement. (Ndahambelela & Shaimemanya, 2017, p. 92).

Teacher empowerment defined. Teacher empowerment is increasingly gaining attention among scholars and practitioners across educational contexts due to its positive associations with a number of teachers' work-related outcomes, such as teaching quality and innovation, teacher-leadership, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and professional commitment that could further impact classroom improvement and school effectiveness (Bogler & Somech, 2004). Despite a growing interest in adopting teacher empowerment as a school effectiveness strategy, there exists a vague understanding of the concept and process of teacher empowerment (Erawan, 2008). Teacher empowerment, being a broad concept, has often been defined differently by various

educational scholars and practitioners for use in different contexts (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011). For instance, Bolin (1989) defines teacher empowerment as "investing teachers with the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and to exercise professional judgement about what and how to teach" (p. 82). Short, Greer, and Melvin (1994) define teacher empowerment as "a process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems" (p. 38). Sweetland and Hoy (2000) define teacher empowerment in terms of "teachers' power to control critical decisions about teaching and learning conditions" (p. 703). Teacher empowerment has also been conceptualized as teachers' participation in decision making, delegation of authority to teachers, and teachers' autonomy (Wadesango, 2010). Although the variations in the definitions of teacher empowerment pose a challenge for gaining a coherent view of teacher empowerment, it is generally observed that most of the studies have approached teacher empowerment from two main perspectives: social structural and psychological (Lee & Nie, 2013).

The social structural perspective of empowerment takes into account the teachers' work environment factors (decision-making ability, status, job satisfaction), which may directly or indirectly influence how they assess their work roles and the tasks that they do. The psychological perspective of empowerment is closely related to an individual's intrinsic work motivation. Teachers who find their work personally meaningful, have significant autonomy within their classroom, and have substantial influence in their work environment had higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals (Lee & Nie, 2013).

Given the importance of school leaders' influence on teachers' psychological functioning at work, previous studies of teacher empowerment have proposed a number of empowering behaviors of school leaders, which are likely to have positive associations with teachers' psychological empowerment. For example, Blase and Blase (1997) found that teachers' sense of empowerment was enhanced when principals demonstrated trust in teachers, developed shared governance structures, listened to individual teachers' input, provided individual teacher autonomy, encouraged innovation, creativity and risk-taking, gave rewards, provided support and showed care for teachers. More recently, other leadership scholars (Lee & Nie, 2013) identified seven dimensions of school leaders' empowering behaviors: delegation of authority, providing intellectual stimulation, giving acknowledgement and recognition, articulating a vision, fostering collaborative relationships, and providing role modeling.

The definitions of the concept of empowerment indicate that it is an active process whose form is determined by circumstances and events, whose essence is human activity related to change. It is a process motivated by the teacher, co-workers, school organization, and the nature of the interpersonal relationships at the workplace. Empowerment is a process that can be achieved by the individual but is also enhanced through the organizational environment (Hargreaves, 2005).

In a study on empowerment among teachers holding leadership positions, Avidov-Ungar et al. (2014) presented a hierarchical model comprising three empowering patterns:

1. limited empowerment;

2. rewarding empowerment;

3. and change-enhancing empowerment.

At the lowest level of empowerment, the researchers found laissez-faire teachers whose empowerment was limited, experiencing self-capacity building while working with students in classrooms. The second level of empowerment, rewarding empowerment, was evident with teachers who were seeking a new path in their career development. Those teachers were motivated to contribute to the school as an organization but were focused on a cost-benefit approach related to their own professional growth. At the third and highest level, the researchers found ambitious teachers who viewed their own professional growth and development as related to restructuring existing programs within their organization actively engaged in creating a positive impact on their school.

Empowered teachers believe they have the knowledge, autonomy, and ability to effectively reach and teach all students. Furthermore, they have the competence to improve their practices from one year to the next. The empowered teacher develops the confidence to take charge of their own growth and becomes adept at solving their own problems.

The relationships among trust, teacher efficacy, and teacher empowerment. Teacher empowerment depends on the characteristics of teachers as well as the particular school situation, in which teachers' sense of efficacy and the creation of a trust relationship are important prerequisites of teacher empowerment (Dee, Henkin, &

Duemer, 2003). Research shows that teacher empowerment is a crucial factor in school effectiveness. According to Sweetland and Hoy (2000), even after controlling for socio-economic status, teacher empowerment is a significant independent predictor of student achievement in reading and mathematics.

Trust facilitates collaboration between teachers and people around them, which leads to the success of school reform efforts and mediates the relationship between students' study culture and teachers' job satisfaction (van Houtte, 2006). The trust relationship between teacher and student plays an important role in their school adjustment, academic motivation, and performance (Lee, 2007). Trust in colleagues also significantly and positively accounts for teachers' commitment to students (Lee et al., 2011). A climate of trust in school can improve student achievement even after accounting for variation between schools in student demographic characteristics, prior achievement, and school socio-economic status (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Teacher efficacy can be defined as a teacher's belief in his or her ability to bring about valued outcomes of engagement and learning among students, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Teachers with a high sense of efficacy devote more classroom time to academic learning, provide more help to students having difficulties, and contribute to a positive academic climate in the school (Chong, Klassen, Huan, Wong, & Kates, 2010). Further, teacher efficacy has been consistently correlated with teachers' attributes and performance. Teachers' perceived self-efficacy has significant impact on teacher burnout, professional commitment, and job satisfaction (Ware & Kitsantas, 2011).

Teacher empowerment is commonly related to the delegation of authority or increasing the involvement of teachers in school decision making. To facilitate teacher participation in decision-making processes, the principal makes sure that teachers and staff feel comfortable by providing an open, trusting school climate. The trust relationship between teachers and principals and/or their colleagues is the important foundation of shared governance, which provides impetus for teacher empowerment (Wan, 2005). Teachers who perceive that they are empowered in their work environments have higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals.

When administrators and teachers trust one another and sense support from each other, they feel safe to take risks and develop new practices. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that relational trust is the core resource for school improvement. They believe that trust in colleagues significantly and positively accounts for teachers' commitment to their students.

Teacher empowerment and student academic performance. Traditionally, school-level personnel are excluded from critical decisions including personnel allocation and hiring, curriculum, budget allocations, and scheduling of teaching time (Zielinski & Hoy, 1983). Short and Greer (1997) argue that staff members who initiate and carry out new ideas by involvement in decision making should in turn create enhanced learning opportunities for students. But is teacher empowerment sufficient in itself to improve student academic performance? Empowerment may increase teachers' job satisfaction and even their commitment and sense of collegiality, but there is no guarantee that instructional practice will change, pedagogical quality will improve, or student

performance will benefit (Taylor & Bogotch, 1994). While teacher empowerment is not a sufficient condition for improving student academic performance, most researchers believe it is a necessary one. For teachers to function professionally in a collaborative intellectual enterprise focused on student learning, they must be able to influence policies and practices pertaining to the instructional mission (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Essentially, teachers need the individual and collective discretionary authority to respond to students by diagnosing their learning needs and devising strategies to meet those needs.

When teachers direct their influence toward promoting a commonly shared and intellectually focused school instructional mission, Marks and Louis (1997) argue that empowerment serves to improve student academic performance. The empowerment of teachers influences student learning indirectly by supporting authentic pedagogy through effective school organization for instruction, operationalized through a professional community and collective responsibility for student learning (Marks & Louis, 1997).

The introduction and cultivation of professional learning communities and other forms of shared instructional decision making in schools are often linked to an enhanced professional culture. Such initiatives have frequently proved to be effective, particularly when they increase teachers' critical reflection and collaboration (Weiner & Higgins, 2016).

In summary, empowering teachers may be a useful strategy to improve student achievement, but the relationship between empowerment and teacher performance is not straightforward. Teacher empowerment has a bearing on the practices and attitudes that

affect teaching practice but not all forms of empowerment have the same effects on teachers and classrooms. Research suggests that although teacher empowerment does not directly affect authentic pedagogy and student performance on authentic tasks, there ae strong indirect effects that promote student and classroom success.

Shared Instructional Decision Making Summary

Researchers have characterized organizational learning in schools as a culture built around the ongoing social processing of knowledge to produce a shared and guiding vision for high-quality work among teachers, students, and administrators (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 2009). According to Deal and Peterson (2009), shared leadership describes teachers as collaborators working to identify problems, move toward solutions, and take action in the best interest of students. For teachers to function professionally in a collaborative intellectual enterprise focused on student learning, they must be able to influence policies and practices pertaining to the instructional mission. According to their research, teachers' sense of empowerment is enhanced when principals demonstrate trust in teachers, develop shared governance structures, listen to individual teachers' input, provide individual teacher autonomy, encourage innovation, creativity and risk-taking, give rewards, provide support, and show care for teachers.

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Instructional Practices

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'Please, please, please try to just shake it up sometimes. Give us a variety of work and activities and don't just stick to the same type of lesson everyday' (Doubet & Hockett, 2016, p. 16). This student's plea, reported in Grant Wiggin's 2014 Annual Student Survey of Academic Experience, reflects the longing of students in classrooms

everywhere. Embedded in this learner's request are the top three culprits of classroom

boredom, echoed by numerous high school students in the same survey: "Our

assignments are just busywork," "There's no variety in what we do from day to day," and

"Teacher talks too much" (p. 16).

Both common sense and research tell us that an engaged student at any grade

level will invest and therefore achieve more than a disengaged student (Hattie, 2012;

Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Walkington, 2013). To address sources of disengagement, the

researchers propose several practical principles to help teachers plan lessons addressing

required content and standards while promoting student investment. First, teacher-to-

student and student-to-student relationships are critical to maintain the interest of

students. When students see themselves reflected in the "business" of class, they became

more comfortable working with their classmates. Second, teachers must be willing to

create interest through critical concepts and essential questions. Essential questions are

provocative, ongoing, recursive inquiries that drive the study of a discipline, topic, or

idea (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013). Third, teachers should gauge and respond to student

progress frequently. Teachers that respond to formative assessment evidence regularly

will engage students in inquiry-based learning causing student questions to become the

rule rather than the exception. And fourth, students should be provided choice. Offering

choice will appeal to two kinds of interests: personal and situational (Schraw, Flowerday,

& Lehman, 2001). Situational interest is "spontaneous, transitory, and environmentally

activated, whereas personal interest is less spontaneous, of enduring personal value, and

activated internally" (Schraw et al., 2001, p. 211). Choice not only satisfies the innate

human desire for autonomy and ownership, but also increases student engagement in a task (Doubet & Hockett, 2016).

Classroom practices grounded on the memorization of facts or drill and practice activities bore students. Thinking, however, for most students most of the time is fun. Lesson plans written to challenge students will support higher order thinking and be likely to interest and engage students. Brookhart (2016) implores all teachers to ensure that every lesson that they deliver encourages students to think deeply through three strategies. First, teachers need to plan two or three open-ended questions for every lesson with opportunities for students to make an argument, or explain their reasoning. Second, teachers should create a plan for students to think rather than retell asking what if and what else questions or posing a purposeful question in which students would have to explore something about a particular topic. And third, teachers need to encourage students to take ownership for their learning and self-assess. Students who can self-assess are poised to be life-long learners and become more reflective to recognize both their strengths and weaknesses.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

According to Ball, Lubienski, and Mewborn (2001), the development and selection of tasks, the election of representations and explanations, the facilitation of productive classroom discussions, the interpretation of student responses, the emphasis on student comprehension and the quick and appropriate analysis student mistakes and difficulties are all underlying elements of pedagogical content knowledge.

Two components are critically important in teacher effectiveness: teacher knowledge of the subject to be taught, and knowledge and skill in how to teach that subject. Together, these features comprise pedagogical content knowledge. Effective teachers understand and are able to apply strategies to help students increase achievement. They understand and apply knowledge of adolescent development to motivate and engage students. Effective teachers are able to diagnose individual learning needs and know how to develop a positive classroom climate to create a stimulating learning environment for all students (NCATE, 2014).

Teachers with more content knowledge also have a greater orientation toward seeking information from students through questioning and discussion in their teaching compared to teachers with less content knowledge (National Research Council, 2000). To teach all students according to today's standards, teachers need to understand subject matter deeply and flexibly so they can help students map their own ideas, relate one idea to another, and re-direct their thinking to create powerful learning (Solis, 2009). Teachers also need to see how ideas connect across fields and to everyday life. These are the building blocks of pedagogical content knowledge.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) integrates the melding of subject matter expertise with pedagogical strategies and knowledge of the learner to produce high quality classroom practice. PCK is a unique knowledge base held by teachers that allows them to consider the structure and importance of an instructional topic, recognize the features that will make it accessible to students, and justify the selection of teaching

practices based on student learning needs (Gess-Newsome, Carlson, Gardner, & Taylor, 2010).

PCK has been qualified as deeply personal (with access to 21st-Century tools and technology) and influenced by teacher interaction and experiences. It is critical for teachers to understand their subject matter to be able to pose rigorous questions, evaluate student understanding, and make decisions about how best to teach the curriculum.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Too often, teachers subscribe to the misguided idea that students of different races need to be taught differently, and they waste an enormous amount of effort in the process. Kadir Rajagopal (2011) argues that a different teaching method or curriculum for students based on race is not necessary. Instead, he supports teaching the entire class in a way that all students can relate to and understand, using aspects of their cultures with which the teacher is comfortable. This has been repeatedly confirmed as Delpit (1995) concluded that educators should have some knowledge of their students' lives outside of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms to accurately know their students' strengths and weaknesses.

According to Ladson-Billings (2002), culturally relevant teaching focuses on:

(1) academic excellence that is not based on cultural deficit models of school failure;

(2) cultural competence which locates excellence within the context of the students' community and cultural identities; and

(3) critical consciousness which challenges inequitable school and societal

structures.

Student learning is placed in a relevant context while students also become more

proficient in understanding their cultures.

In order to develop exemplary abilities in any content area, teachers must be able

to link instruction to what is already familiar to students. This may require teachers to

engage in micro-ethnographies to develop an understanding of student's communities,

families, leisure activities, and worldviews (Boutte, Kelly-Jackson, & Johnson, 2010).

Geneva Gay (2010) proposed culturally responsive teaching rests on six

dimensions:

- Culturally responsive teachers are socially and academically empowering by
  setting high expectations for students with a commitment to every student's
  success;

- Multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences,
  contributions, and perspectives;

- Validate every student's culture, bridging gaps between school and home
  through diversified instructional strategies and multicultural curricula;

- Socially, emotionally, and politically comprehensive as they seek to educate
  the whole child;

- Transformative of schools and societies by using students' existing strengths
  to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum design;

- And are emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices

  and ideologies as they lift "the veil of presumed absolute authority from

  conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools" (Gay, 2010, p. 38).

Culturally responsive teachers not only understand differences related to race,

ethnicity, culture, and language, they treat them as assets upon which to build rather than

as deficits to overcome. Culturally responsive teachers know how to adapt and employ

multiple representations of subject-matter knowledge using students' everyday life

experiences. This bridges the gap between students' personal cultural knowledge and the

unknown materials and concepts to be mastered. Culturally responsive teachers learn

from families and community organizations and use this knowledge to inform their

teaching and help families support their child's education. Culturally responsive teachers

avoid making generalizations about group behavior or identity and interact with students

as individuals, caring and supporting them while holding high expectations (Gay, 2010).

The Accomplished Teacher

Teachers possessing effective pedagogical content knowledge coupled with

culturally responsive behavior are ahead of the curve. Levin (2008) believes the heart of

school improvement rests on improving daily teaching and learning practices in schools,

balanced with the notion that the school is the appropriate unit of evaluation—that is,

everyone in the school needs to collaborate to ensure that the daily teaching and learning

practices are the focus of the school, and all are responsible for their success. He

advocates nine essential practices for improved student outcomes: (a) high expectations

for all students; (b) strong personal connections between students and adults; (c) greater

student engagement and motivation; (d) a rich and engaging formal and informal curriculum; (e) effective teaching practices in all classrooms on a daily basis; (f) effective use of data and feedback by students and staff to improve learning; (g) early support with minimum disruption for students in need; (h) strong positive relationships with parents; and (i) effective engagement within the broader community.

According to Hattie (2012), powerful, passionate, and accomplished teachers are those who:

- focus on students' cognitive engagement with the context of what it was that was being taught;

- focus on developing a way of thinking and reasoning that emphasized problem-solving and teaching strategies relating to the content that they wished students to learn;

- focus on imparting new knowledge and understanding, and then monitored how students gained fluency and appreciation in this new knowledge;

- focus on providing feedback in an appropriate and timely manner helped students to attain worthwhile goals of the lesson;

- seek feedback about their effect on progress and proficiency of all of their students;

- have a deep understanding about how we learn;

- focus on seeing learning through the eyes of the students, appreciating their start in learning, and their often non-linear progressions to the goals;

- supporting their deliberate practice, providing feedback about their errors and

  misdirections;

- and caring that the students got to the goals and that the students shared the

  teacher's passion for the material being learned.

Noting the commonalities in the research by Levin and Hattie, both argue that

high expectations, personal connections to the curriculum and interests of the students,

teachers as experts using student data to drive their instruction, and monitoring student

progress to provide timely and purposeful feedback are key to student learning.

In a study by Smith, Baker, Hattie, and Bond (2008), findings reported how

expert teachers differed from experienced teachers. First, expert teachers identify the

most important ways to represent the subject that they taught. Second, expert teachers

are proficient at creating an optimal classroom climate for learning—one that generates

an atmosphere of trust. Third, expert teachers monitor learning and provide feedback

through selective information gathering and responsiveness to students, they anticipate

when the interest was waning, know who is not understanding, and develop and test

hypotheses about the effect of their teaching on all of their students. Fourth, expert

teachers believe that all students can reach the success criteria which require teachers to

have high respect for their students and show a passion that all can indeed attain success.

And fifth, expert teachers influence surface and deep student outcomes and such

outcomes are not confined to test scores, but cover a wide range:

- students staying on at school and making an investment in their learning;

- students developing surface, deep, and conceptual understandings;

- students developing multiple learning strategies and a desire to master learning;

- students being willing to take risks and enjoying the challenge of learning;

- students having respect for self and others;

- and students developing into citizens who are challenging minds and the disposition to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical participants in our complex world.

In contrast, experienced teachers differ from that of expert teachers mainly in the degree of challenge that they present to students. Experienced teachers are adept at surface learning whereas expert teachers were much more adept at deep levels of learning. "Students who are taught by expert teachers exhibit an understanding of the concepts targeted in the instruction that is more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than the understanding achieved by students in classes taught by experienced teachers" (Hattie, 2012, p. 34).

Effective teaching is often called an art and a science. Successful teachers find a balance between challenging students academically and maintaining appropriate levels of classroom behavior. MacSuga-Gage, Simonsen, and Briere (2013) focus on three key areas of effective teaching:

1. Delivering explicit and engaging academic instruction
2. Implementing empirically supported classroom management strategies
3. Building relationships with students and their families. (p. 1)

Jackson (2009) defines a master teacher mindset as a "disposition toward teaching" (p. 2). He argues "that having all the answers isn't as nearly as important as knowing what questions to ask" (Jackson, 2009, p. 2). A master teacher mindset will foster student-centered classrooms with adequate opportunity for students to manipulate the content as opposed to note-taking through teacher-directed lecture.

Good teaching for master teachers is fluid and automatic with great thought and planning occurring in preparation for teaching situations. Master teachers unpack the standards and set learning targets making conscious decisions about what students need to know and how well they need to know it. Master teachers decide early on what evidence of student mastery they collect and use this feedback to inform their instructional practices and curriculum-related decisions while helping students move toward reaching the learning targets. Supports within their instructional practices are put in place to meet the unique needs of all students prior to frustration and failure. Master teachers base their expectations not on what students can or cannot do but on what they can do to help their students (Jackson, 2009).

Pondering good versus great, Carol Ann Tomlinson (2015) searched to determine what separated transcendent schools from good schools. Adopting the work of Thomas Sergiovanni, Tomlinson discovered that good teachers exercise consistent technical leadership (plans, organizes, coordinates, and ensure all systems are go), human leadership (harnesses human relationships to ensure people experience support, encouragement, and opportunity for growth), and educational leadership (develops and shares expertise on the varied facets of school and schooling). Extraordinary teachers,

however, were exemplars of the fourth and fifth tiers of Sergiovanni's (1999) leadership

predict excellence: symbolic leadership and cultural leadership. These symbolic teacher

leaders focus on what is most valuable to the school and develop a vision to work toward

and communicate a shared sense of purpose. The cultural teacher leaders create a sense

of history, "to reflect and perpetuate an ideology that captures the group's mission"

(Tomlinson, 2015, p. 89).

Teaching for Mastery

Research indicates that holding mastery goals is related to a host of beneficial

outcomes. Students who focus on mastery are more likely to persist at academic tasks,

particularly challenging ones (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000).

These students use more effective self-regulatory and metacognitive strategies (Wolters,

2004). Wiggins (2013) points out,

> motivation researchers also find that teachers' classroom practices can facilitate
> students' adoption of mastery goals when teachers:
> 1. allow them to resubmit assignments that need more work;
> 2. do not pressure students by consistently talking about grades and
>   assessments
> 3. encourage self-comparisons and avoid comparing students'
>   achievement with that of other students. (p. 20)

Studies indicate that when students learn in these types of classrooms, they experience

numerous academic benefits (Midgley, 2002; Turner et al., 2002).

Many factors go into defining and achieving mastery and how educators plan their

classes in ways to support more students achieving mastery. If teachers want students to

achieve mastery on a particular task or assignment, "they must make sure students

understand the goal and must clearly articulate to students what constitutes mastery" (Guskey & Anderman, 2013, p. 22). Further, the co-authors state, "If teachers want their students to focus on mastery of content and tasks, they need to allow students to work on tasks repeatedly, without penalties, until they achieve mastery" (p. 22). To summarize, teachers emphasize the goal is mastering the task, rather than focus on receiving a high grade. Similar to a coach running a play over and over again until the team has mastered its execution, teachers must give students multiple opportunities to achieve success.

Blended Learning

The U.S. Department of Education's 2010 National Education Technology Plan distinguished among individualized, personalized, and differentiated instruction. Individualization refers to instruction that is paced to the learning needs of different learners. Learning goals are the same for all students, but students progress through the material at different speeds. Differentiation refers to instruction that is tailored to the learning preferences of different learners. Learning goals are the same for all students but the method of instruction varies according to the preferences of each student. Personalization refers to instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners. The learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace varies. Hence, personalization encompasses both differentiation and individualization.

According to Horn and Staker (2015), thousands of school districts across America, over 75% by some estimates, are starting to awaken to the possibilities of online learning. Three common themes that are driving this movement are:

1. desire for personalization
2. desire for access
3. desire to control costs. (Horn & Staker, 2015, p. 11)

These potential benefits of online learning—personalization, access, and cost control—are pulling people away from traditional education and toward the new opportunity of blended learning. Blended learning, as defined by Horn and Staker (2015), "is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace" (p. 34). As Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) describe, nowhere are the tensions between traditional and innovative pedagogies greater than in the paradox of technology.

> How can we live in and with a digitally transformed world, when schools operate with large classes, traditional lessons, standardized tests, and whole-class teaching styles? How do you implement educational technology that epitomizes flexible innovation, within a structure that still supports and excels at a traditional and tested achievement? (p. 82)

> Schrum and Levin (2009) explain,

> If schools are to become relevant for 21st Century students and teachers, we have to make some serious changes by first understanding who are our workers (teachers) and constituents (students) and then begin doing what is needed to make education relevant for generations to come. (p. 31)

The researchers argue,

> Our students today need to focus on learning 21st Century skills that include critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, and communication and collaboration. They also need to become literate in multiple

ways, including information literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy. (Schrum & Levin, 2009, p. 31)

Entering blended learning into the classroom helps maximize their motivation to reach and teach all students and incorporate 21st Century skills. Horn and Staker (2015) describe five ways to restructure the teacher's role to maximize their motivators:

1. extending the reach of great teachers, in that digital technology opens up the possibility for great teachers to reach more students

2. assigning individual teachers specialized responsibilities, such as content experts who focus on developing curriculum, small group leaders who provide direct instruction through stations or lab activities, project designers, mentors, evaluators grading and designing assessments, and data analysis experts

3. allowing teachers to teach in teams creating learning studios with multiple teachers working in a variety of roles

4. awarding teacher micro-credentials for mastery of skills, such as badges or ribbons as a result of digital technology professional development

5. granting authority to blended learning teams giving teachers leeway to innovate and create as they see fit.

Although blended learning offers enormous potential to personalize learning for each student's distinct learning needs and frees up student and teacher time to focus on many of the activities that are critical to student success but too often receive too little attention, blended learning is still evolving. Clausen, Britten, and Ring (2008) suggest that "careful consideration of teachers' instructional practices—and whether current

practices support effective technology use by students—should be the foundation for district decision-makers before jumping into a 1:1 laptop initiative" (p. 19).

Instructional Practices Summary

Building positive relationships is an important first step to a successful classroom environment. After forging personal connections and familiarizing oneself with student likes and dislikes, great thought should be put into lesson plan design. Lessons that are relevant, meaningful, and support higher order thinking skills are likely to interest and engage students. Recognizing that not all students learn at the same pace or in the same manner, supports need to be put in place to ensure each student can reach their maximum potential. Further, research suggests less emphasis should be placed on grades thus allowing students the opportunity to work toward mastery resubmitting assignments when necessary. In addition, providing access to technology in a 21st-Century teaching and learning environment helped foster creativity and innovation, allowing students to explore, research, and learn in a more personalized fashion.

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Professional Culture

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Edgar Schein, professor emeritus at MIT, is a leading scholar on organizational culture. He defined organizational culture in these terms:

> Culture is a way of working together toward common goals that have been followed so frequently and so successfully that people don't even think about trying to do things another way. If a culture had formed, people will autonomously do what they need to do to be successful. (Horn & Staker, 2015, p. 250)

According to Deal and Peterson (2009), research suggests that a strong, positive culture serves several beneficial functions, including the following:

- fosters effort and productivity;

- improves collegial and collaborative activities that in turn promote better communication and problem solving;

- supports successful change and improvement efforts;

- builds commitment and helps students and teachers identify with the school; amplifies energy and motivation of staff members and students;

- and focuses attention and daily behavior on what was important and valued.

Most importantly, school culture is an important part of the work that educators need to do if students are going to achieve at high levels. An effective school culture "will provide students a respectful mediating experience through which they can understand, examine, affirm, modify, or change understandings of the world and how they want to engage in it" (Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012, p. 2). Teachers matter and what they do matters most.

Adult Professional Culture

In the current educational climate in the U.S., teachers are under a great deal of public pressure that focuses on raising students' test scores (Crocco & Costigan, 2006; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Reform efforts over the years have emphasized the need for teacher accountability. It is no longer sufficient for teachers to just master instruction in the classroom setting. They are now being expected to work on curriculum development, serve on site-based management teams, develop

innovative forms of instructional delivery, and take an active role in solving broader issues related to student performance outcomes (Johnston, Wetherill, High, & Greenebaum, 2002). Alteration of the norms of practice create a need for a professional culture in which teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders can engage in meaningful discussions about concerns affecting the whole school.

Since 1980, many researchers have studied professional culture, defined to be the distinctive blend of norms, values, and accepted modes of professional practice, both formal and informal, that prevail among colleagues (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, 2001). Sometimes called teacher culture, professional community, or teacher community, researchers "have sought to identify the conditions that promote positive working relationships among teachers" (Kardos et al., 2001, p. 254). As organizations, schools need teachers who are satisfied with their jobs and who work with one another to build school community and increase student achievement (Stearns, Banerjee, Moller, & Mickelson, 2015). Studies found a strong relationship between work environment of teachers, teacher job satisfaction, and student achievement (Hall, Pearson, & Carroll, 1992; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Dissatisfied teachers undermine educational goals, and dissatisfaction with teaching conditions lead to higher teacher absenteeism, stress, and turnover (Renzulli, Parrott, & Beattie, 2011).

Most school improvement plans concentrate on academic achievement goals, decisions about academic focus, deployment of instructional models, and teaching techniques and curriculum tools. Most school improvement plans aspire to create academic focus and academic sense of responsibility, intensity, and urgency—known as

academic press (Lee & Smith, 1999). Fisher et al. (2012) believe that no school improvement effort would be effective, maintained, or enhanced unless school culture and academic press were both addressed and aligned. To engage students in a world-class educational experience, the authors promote a culture that is:

1. welcoming;
2. the conditions for learning are ever-present;
3. schools examine how behaviors affect us, others, and the world;
4. a shared belief that we are a part of something special and great; and
5. the language creates and facilitates personal pride, purpose, and power. (p. 2)

Student Culture

Research by Mary Helen Immordino-Yang demonstrates that students need to feel a meaningful emotional connection to the material to learn. In an interview, she asserted, "People think of emotion as getting in the way of cognition, but it doesn't. Emotion steers our thinking; it's the rudder that directs our mind and organizes what we need to do" (Sparks, 2016, p. 12). Positive teacher-student relationships are built on this connection to promote learning. An extensive research base shows that improving students' relationships with teachers has important, positive, and long-lasting implications for both students' academic and social development (Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2016). Overall, students' learning is influenced by their connectedness with the adults in charge, classmates, and the larger community. James Comer, professor of child psychiatry at Yale University, declares, "No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship" (Wormeli, 2016, p. 11).

No matter how much students value the learning task, students easily lose their balance in the classroom without a sense of safety and well-being as learners. Teachers foster that important feeling by supporting students as they risk trying any new learning challenge, thus increasing their students' expectation of success (Cushman, 2013). From the combined perspectives of teachers, students, and scientists, Cushman (2013) summarizes eight central conditions that support powerful learning for students in a safe classroom climate:

1. I feel ok;
2. It matters;
3. It's active;
4. It stretches me;
5. I have a coach;
6. I have to use it;
7. I think back on it; and
8. I plan my next steps. (p. 43)

In order for students to feel welcome and a part of the school community, a healthy school-wide culture of professionalism and respect must exist. For students to thrive academically, adults must model and foster a positive and meaningful classroom environment.

School climate research, which has focused primarily on students' experiences and perceptions regarding their relationships with teachers, provides some preliminary insights into how teachers' professional culture may interact with students' learning culture. For example, when teachers report that their professional culture is characterized by respect, trust, and caring, students characterize their relationships with their teachers in similar positive ways (Thapa et al., 2013).

Additionally, positive student perceptions of student-teacher relationships can positively impact student behavior and engagement. Further, such positive student perceptions of school climate can, ultimately, enable student learning and achievement (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). When these elements of a positive student learning culture are missing, however, real and negative consequences including high teacher turnover and low student achievement can occur (Weiner & Higgins, 2017). In all, student culture matters for organizational, adult, and student outcomes.

Relationships First

As important as school culture is to school improvement, one must not overlook the fact that shaping a school culture is a complex process—a mixture of leadership, relationships, trust, student focus, values, and beliefs developed and nurtured over years (Valentine, 2006). The more educators collaborate and problem-solve the issues that impact student success, the more colleagues build trust and relationships that produce a collaborative culture. Fisher et al. (2012) identify five musts to fully implement and operationalize a positive school culture:

1. a mission and vision developed or revisited by a representative group of stakeholders;
2. a specified set of purposeful language, actions, and routines designed to make students and other stakeholders feel welcome, comfortable, important, and understood;
3. a specified set of purposeful language, actions, routines, designed to help students and other stakeholders identify the expectations of each pillar;
4. a focus on quality, including quality instruction, quality interactions, and a cycle of continuous, quality improvement; and
5. continual attention to creating a passionate and competent staff capable of implementing culture-building systems. (p. 7)

There is no single, simple way to improve school culture and build community, but if everyone works together, it can be done (Bruckner & Mausbach, 2015). Bruckner and Mausbach (2015) believe a comprehensive approach to improving school culture, with educators and community leaders working toward a common goal to change for the good, is critical. In addition, the educational leaders motivate a dedicated staff who relentlessly focused on culture, curriculum, and strategies to involve the community and build capacity all around. Their hope is that all educators will devote time, energy, study, enthusiasm, and hard work to create a culture committed to change for the better, and note, "there is no easy button you can click to make positive changes appear" (Bruckner & Mausbach, 2015, p. 64).

Professional Culture Summary

Based on the research, no significant learning takes place without positive relationships between administrators and teachers as well as teachers and students. Collectively, being a part of something special requires positive working relationships with individuals sensing pride and purpose in their roles. With teachers moving beyond a traditional approach to classroom instruction, research suggests that teachers are now curriculum experts, data team participants, innovators in the development of interactive lesson plans, and more. Therefore, it is critical to develop a professional culture that administrators, teachers, and other instructional support personnel embrace with high expectations for themselves and others while supportive of all students in an effort to meet the unique needs of all learners.

Review of the Research Summary and Overview

Classrooms are becoming more and more diverse with students from a variety of backgrounds, developmental levels, and learning styles. The one-size-fits-all approach to classroom instruction will not meet the unique needs of each student. From the research, I learned that the principal, along with instructional leaders such as assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, academic coaches, department chairs, and teacher-leaders share the responsibility for providing high-quality instruction for all students. In addition, there needs to be a balance between student engagement, frequent assessment, and differentiation of instruction (infusing 21st-Century technology tools) to meet the unique needs of all learners.

More qualitative studies need to be conducted in high schools to better document what administrators, instructional leaders, and teachers are doing to empower teachers to promote high academic growth in all students. The literature supports the desire for teachers and administrators to meet the needs of all students and addresses the issues of those students who are inadequately prepared to take on the challenges of a high-stakes test. Taking into account cultural diversity, language barriers, access to resources and technology all complicate matters when learning outcomes are so critical to school accountability reports.

In researching what practices and support structures positively promote growth in students, there were no definitive answers and it has been a challenge to locate in-depth studies related to this concept of academic growth. Bringing MacSuga-Gage et al.'s (2013) effective teaching strategies to fruition or implementing Marzano's (2003) five

frameworks for "What Works in Schools" with fidelity takes a special teacher. All educators want to help their students improve academically. The literature indicates that principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, effective instructional practices, and a positive school culture are important to achieve academic growth. More than 30 years ago, Ronald Edmond's landmark study provided an empirical foundation for what many knew intuitively: effective schools almost always have leaders focused on instruction (Edmonds, 1979). Subsequent research has expanded Edmond's notion of instructional leadership, demonstrating that the work of improving teaching not only rested in the hands of the principal but was also distributed across a host of leaders, such as instructional coaches, curriculum facilitators, and teacher leaders (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

In the State of North Carolina, EVAAS growth measures are used to provide a reliable comparison of the achievement levels of groups of students from one year to the next. The growth measures also indicate how much progress students are making, as a group, over time (NCDPI, 2015). Many factors come into play when motivating students to improve and achieve academic success. Perhaps a balance between traditional teaching practices and innovation, student autonomy and teacher directives, student needs and student interests, and structured skill-building and self-learning would foster "best practices" in schools.

I recognize that the challenge of leading change for academic growth in all students is formidable. Building the capacity of teachers to best prepare students with the confidence to acquire knowledge and the skills to meet the challenges that the future

holds is a daunting task. From the literature, no text, program, curriculum mapping, or technological device seem to be the answer. Instead, educational leaders and teachers, through empowerment, a positive professional culture, collaboration and shared decision making, and inspiring instructional practices appear to be the most important resources to provide every child with a quality education with the potential to improve from one year to the next.

Conceptual Framework

Examining how principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders support a culture of high expectations and academic growth in all students, I hoped to gain insight to contribute to the literature of principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture in high schools.

The conceptual framework that supported my research and guided my efforts to address the research questions is provided below in Figure 1. Achieving high academic growth in all students is a complex task involving a variety of stakeholders through intentional practices in a caring and collegial manner.

The first lens that leads to significant academic growth is principal and teacher instructional leadership. Principals who are highly visible, communicate a sound vision earning staff buy-in, provide timely and purposeful feedback to teachers, and offer opportunities for teachers to lead and contribute to a culture of high expectations is critical. Teachers who welcome their students, plan rigorous and relevant lessons, and track student progress motivating students to continually improve leads to a growth

mindset. Principals and teachers working together to make student success a priority is

critical to drive school improvement.
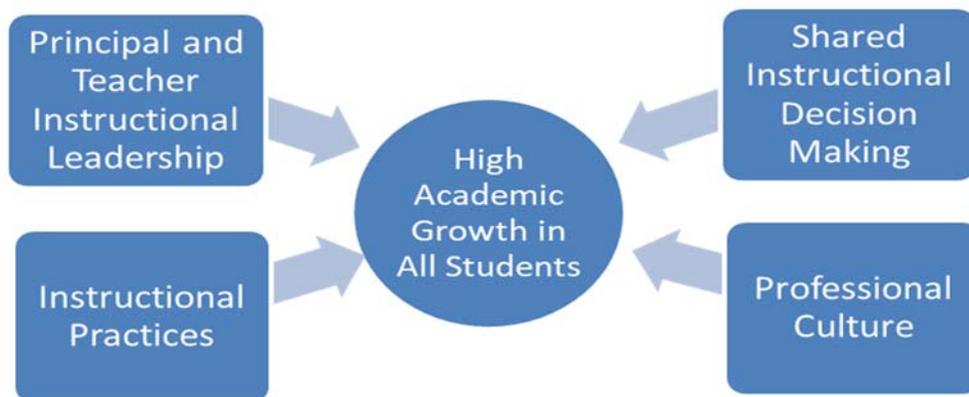
Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework of High School Practices and Support Structures

Affecting Student Growth Results in the EOC Subjects: Math 1, English 2, and Biology.

The second lens is shared instructional decision making. Through authentic

professional learning communities, teachers and instructional support personnel develop

effective lesson plans, analyze student data, create common assessments, and discuss

student progress or lack thereof. With structures in place, teachers feel empowered to

collectively improve their craft and increase the quality of teaching and student learning

in their classroom. Principals who allow teachers influence over their classroom and

autonomy to produce relevant and meaningful activities also gain a great deal of trust

among staff. Trust then facilitates collaboration and the sharing of ideas contributing to

stronger classrooms which in turn lead to increased student success.

A third lens is instructional practices. Gone is the day of lecture and traditional

assessment of students. Instructional practices must be intentional and meaningful.

Students should be challenged to think critically and communicate often. Teaching the right stuff is critically important, as well. Aligned to the state standards of the course, students should be assessed frequently receiving feedback on their strengths and areas in need of improvement. Strong personal connections, greater student engagement, the effective use of data and feedback, and providing the necessary support for students leads to academic growth and improvement.

A fourth lens is professional culture. If the school or classroom environment is not welcoming, then the motivation to learn suffers. Positive working relationships lead to greater job satisfaction which rubs off on the students in a positive manner. To maintain high expectations in all classrooms, staff need to buy in to a common vision and purpose. Every student matters and every student deserves an opportunity to learn and grow academically. As mentioned, no significant learning occurs without a positive relationship. Developing a culture in which all students are valued and appreciated contributes to a healthy environment conducive to learning.

Each of the four lenses are at the core of motivating students to maximize their potential and academically grow from one year to the next. High schools that optimize each of the four facets of teaching and learning and recognize the significance of each of the components working in harmony positively impact the performance of principals, teachers, and other instructional support staff in an effort to grow students academically.

Hearing the voices of experts in the field of education and the teaching and learning community regarding each of the four lenses showed how and why schools were achieving high academic growth in all students. Most importantly, a variety of experts in

the field of education provided relevance to this study. Through their personal

experience stories, connections to schools and school communities, pertinent findings,

publications, and work in the educational field, educational experts helped to ground the

study in strategies and practices that promote high academic growth in all students. As

the researcher, I hope to contribute to the theoretical, literature-based discourse on

improving academic growth in all students through the voices of high school principals,

assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, and teachers.

CHAPTER III

STUDY METHODOLOGY

A great deal of research has been conducted on instructional leadership and practices (Hallinger, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003; Reitzug, West, & Angel, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008; Southworth, 2002) but what works in one high school may not be as effective in another. High schools vary in culture and climate and their methods for supporting teachers to meet the unique needs of all students. Through in-depth interviews and informal observation, I explored what principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders do to promote high academic growth in all students. "Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 15). I took a hands-on approach to gather first-hand accounts of current instructional practices, supports, and structures that principals, curriculum facilitators, and teachers were implementing to motivate students to achieve at high levels. In a diverse and ever-changing society, adding to the literature on what high growth high schools have done benefits teachers, administrators, and district leaders throughout the State of North Carolina and elsewhere.

As a high school principal and aspiring district administrator, I have practical goals in examining current practices, decision-making protocols, teaching strategies, building cultures, and supportive learning environments. Interviewing administrators,

instructional support personnel, and teachers provided insight and information that is transferrable and useful to increasing my own capacity as an educational leader.

Under the qualitative research umbrella, I conducted an interview-based study and sought to derive meaning from the collection of rich description and data from the three high schools. Choosing an interview-based approach uncovered the behaviors, thoughts, interpretations, and actions of a variety of educators. In-depth interviews brought to light the processes and practices that are occurring within each high school. Open-ended questions inspired administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers to share how they specifically supported efforts to achieve academic growth in all students. A semi-structured conversation gathered rich description from each participant focused on addressing the following research questions:

1. How did participants perceive that principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture each play a role in achieving high growth in high schools?

2. How did principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture synthesize to influence the performance of principals, teachers, and students in high schools that achieve high growth?

Based on participant insight, understanding, and information I compared, contrasted, and identified patterns among the high schools.

Methodology and Its Justification

I aimed to study the instructional practices and professional culture of three different high schools to help explore and determine how high academic growth comes about in high schools similar to the one in which I work. I interviewed key instructional personnel and building leaders to tease out information and insight into classroom instructional practices, empowerment of teachers, professional school culture, principal leadership, teacher leadership, and shared decision making that led to student success on standardized tests.

Many factors go into the efforts of schools aiming for high growth, and I hoped to gather a thick, rich description through face-to-face interactions with key personnel to uncover what is working to meet the unique needs of all students. As Braun and Clarke (2013) wrote, "qualitative research uses words as data . . . collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways" (p. 3). To maintain anonymity, I used pseudonyms in place of each high school and its participants. I used a qualitative approach in the form of an interview-based study of three high schools in the Piedmont Triad region. The three selected high schools were similar in size and demographic makeup to that of the school in which I work, Western Alamance High School (as described in detail in the Problem Statement section of Chapter I). I aimed to "build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 17).

After receiving district approval to visit a particular high growth high school, I contacted the principal of each school. With the support of the principal, I conducted

sixty to ninety minute interviews at the school's site with administrators, teachers, and

other key instructional support personnel. As Patton (2015, p. 246) explains,

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly
> observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot
> observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot
> observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe
> how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes
> on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things.

I selected interviewees based on the recommendation of each building principal.

I relied on the building principal to refer personnel that he or she deemed fit for this

study, as the principal knows his or her staff the best. "Purposeful sampling is based on

the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight

therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015, p. 96). I encouraged principals to select assistant principals, curriculum

facilitators, and teachers within their building who were instructional leaders and

contributors to the successful academic growth of students. Building participants

included administrators, curriculum facilitators, department chairs, and teachers to

provide a range of instructional leaders who impact academic growth in students in a

variety of ways. Interviewees had a range of years of experience in the field of

education, represented a variety of subject areas in addition to the EOC subjects (math 1,

biology, and English 2), provided diversity of thought, and reflected the demographic

make-up of the school. Four to seven participants from each high school consented to be

a part of the study. Semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The

interview protocol pertaining to principals, assistant principals, and curriculum

facilitators is located in Appendix A. The interview protocol for department chairs and teachers is located in Appendix B.

My interview-based qualitative study focused on "meaning, understanding, and process" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 41) at three high schools achieving significant academic growth in all students. I collected data through interviews and informal observation and analyzed inductively to address the research questions. Findings were "richly descriptive and presented as themes" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 41).

Connecting the Conceptual Framework and the Research Questions to Interview

Questions

With overlap and similarities in both interview protocols, Table 1 provides clarity and insight into how the interview questions were framed around the four components of the conceptual framework. Further, the table depicts how intertwined the questions were as they often overlapped pertaining to several of the frameworks.

I conducted follow-up interviews via email as I analyzed the data. To rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants said and did, I conducted member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to verify participant data and conclusions were accurate.   I shared transcripts with the participants to provide an opportunity for feedback to ensure the information captured in the interview accurately reflected the thoughts and ideas of the interviewee.

Table 1

Connecting the Conceptual Framework to Interview Questions

	Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership	Shared Instructional Decision-Making	Instructional Practices	Professional Culture
How does principal instructional leadership support high academic growth?	Tell me about your leadership style? Describe your ideal teacher? Describe your ideal classroom?	What supports or structures are in place to help you succeed in the classroom?	How do you use technology in your role? How is differentiation of instruction implemented in your school?	How do you foster creativity with your staff? How do you support a relevant and meaningful curriculum?
How does teacher instructional leadership support high academic growth?	How do you engage all students?	Describe your means of formative assessment. Are common assessments being used?	In what ways are you checking for understanding to ensure all students grasp the material?	How do you share ideas with colleagues? How do you develop positive relationships with all students?
How does shared instructional decision making support high academic growth?	How do you provide time for teachers to collaborate?	As a school that exceeds growth, how have you had an impact on that?	What are some non-negotiables that you have with your staff as it relates to their classroom instructional practices?	In what ways do you collaborate with your colleagues?

Table 1

Cont.

	Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership	Shared Instructional Decision-Making	Instructional Practices	Professional Culture
How do instructional practices support high academic growth?	What are your expectations for your classroom teachers in their development of relevant and meaningful lesson plans?	What does engaging instruction look like to you? How do you promote rigor and high expectations?	How do you motivate teachers to challenge their students engaging them in higher levels of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy?	How do you use data to drive your support of high quality teaching and learning?
How does professional culture support high academic growth?	Describe your subject area PLC? How does your PLC drive your instructional practices?	If you could attribute the academic success of your students to a few key components, what would they be?	How do you check for understanding to ensure students are mastering the content?	What types of formative assessment strategies do you use to gather feedback from your students?

Following the tenets of Merriam and Tisdell (2015), when analyzing the data, I identified patterns and themes that characterized the data through the process of coding. I used research memos to record thoughts in a journal including impressions, observations, reflections, and interpretations that factored into the analysis of data and the development of findings and implications. I generated findings and implications in response to the outlined conceptual framework in an effort to answer the research questions.

The goal of this study was to understand how high schools were achieving high academic growth in all students. Drawing on the experiences, practices, thought processes, structures, and routines of the practitioners in each school supported the findings of the study. Hearing the voices of educational leaders in each school and their perspectives on how they contributed to the academic growth of all students was paramount.

Key Concepts, Vocabulary, and Definitions

21st-Century Classroom Environment—A classroom space in which students can access technology and other Web 2.0 resources motivating them to think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate with their peers, and use creativity (Kay & Greenhill, 2013).

Empowerment—Increasing a person's ability to perform a task, affording that person power to delegate authority and responsibility, to nurture the ability to take decisions, and to perform tasks through one's own personal will (Avidov-Ungar et al., 2014).

Engaging Activities—A student-centered classroom in which the teacher facilitates learning through relevant, meaningful, and challenging activities with students manipulating the content promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills (McMahon & Portelli, 2004).

EVAAS—Education Value-Added Assessment System is a state-wide model for measuring student growth when common assessments are administered such as the End-of-Course assessments of math 1, English 2, and biology (NCDPI, 2015).

Growth Index Value—Conceptually, growth compares the entering achievement of students to the current achievement. Value-added models measure the amount of growth a group of students is making and attributes it to the district, school, or teacher level. The value-added measure compares that growth of a group of students to an expected amount of growth, and it is very important to define that expectation. Mathematically, the "expected" growth is typically set at zero (between predicted and actual student performance), such that positive gains or effects are evidence that students made more than the expected progress and negative gains or effects are evidence that students made less than the expected progress. However, the definition of "expected growth" varies by model, and the precise definition depends on the selected model and state or district preference (NCDPI, 2015).

Mastery—Effective transfer of learning in authentic and worthy performance. Students have mastered a subject when they are fluent, even creative, in using their knowledge, skills, and understanding in key performance challenges and contexts at the heart of that subject, as measured against valid and high standards (Wiggins, 2013).

Principal Instructional Leadership—Communicating high expectations for teachers and students, supervising instruction, monitoring assessment and student progress, coordinating the school's curriculum, promoting a climate for learning, and creating a supportive work environment (Marks & Printy, 2003). More recently, principal instructional leadership has shifted from a focus on the principal as "an inspector of teacher competence" to the principal as a "facilitator of teacher growth" (p. 274).

Professional Learning Community—"An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 11). Three big ideas that drive the work of a PLC:

1. The purpose is to ensure that all students learn at high levels;
2. Helping all students learn requires a collaborative and collective effort; and
3. To assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn we must focus on results—evidence of student learning—and use results to inform and improve our professional practice and respond to students who need intervention or enrichment. (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 14)

Proficiency—Grade-level proficiency results in an exam score of level 3 or 4 (out of 5) on the math 1, English 2, or biology End-of-Course assessment. College-and-Career Ready proficiency results in a score of level 4 or 5 (out of 5) on the math 1, English 2, or biology End-of-Course assessment (NCDPI, 2015).

Teacher Leadership—"Teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 6).

Methods

Research Setting

As a high school principal in the Alamance-Burlington School System, I conducted my research outside of the school district in which I work. I selected three North Carolina public high schools (grade 9-12) from the Piedmont Triad region based on their EVAAS average growth status as indicated on the 2014-2015 & 2015-2106

North Carolina school report cards. I chose high schools that attained an overall average rating of exceeding expected growth (based on the combined average of the three EOC's math 1, English 2, and biology) for at least two consecutive years.

In total, there were 18 public high schools in the Piedmont Triad region that obtained an exceeded growth status in EVAAS. Of the 18 high schools, 12 were in a district in which access to research sites would have been difficult to negotiate. Furthermore, two of the high schools were located in the same district where I work, leaving four eligible high schools for study. Of the four remaining high schools, I selected the three that most closely reflected the makeup of the school in which I was principal. The selected schools are listed in Table 2.

After narrowing down the selected high schools that exceeded expected growth and best fit the profiled ranges, I contacted each of the school districts requesting access and permission to conduct the research. Two out of three of the districts had similar approval processes with one requiring a more detailed explanation of the study.

To access Washington High, I wrote a research proposal consisting of an executive summary of the study, the research questions, methodology, purpose of the research with a brief justification of the study based on current literature, a description of the direct benefit to the profession, a description of the activities and school/staff involvement, the timeline, Institutional Review Board approval, a copy of the informed staff consent form, and a sponsor. Not knowing anyone in this particular district, I contacted the Executive Director for Accountability and Research to inquire about the lack of sponsor. With his approval, I was able circumvent the sponsor and submitted my

research proposal application along with a $25 reading fee. A committee convened and

reviewed the proposal providing ultimate approval.

Table 2

Public High School Selection Criteria

	Student Population	Location	EVAAS Growth Status	% of Free or Reduced Lunch Students	% of Minority Students	Stable Principal Leadership
Western Alamance High	1190	Piedmont Triad Region	Not Met	26	30	Yes
Lincoln Senior High	1254	Piedmont Triad	Exceeds Growth (94.0)	33	18	Yes
Washington High	2230	Piedmont Triad	Exceeds Growth (100.0)	26	35	Yes
Adams High	1319	Piedmont Triad	Exceeds Growth (86.4)	65	59	No

Note. Student growth = average expected score – average observed score. More specifically, the EVAAS Growth Status label means 94% of the students at Lincoln Senior High met their average expected score, 100% of Washington High students met their average expected score and 86.4% of the students at Adams High met their average expected score.

Accessing each of the two other high schools did not require as much scrutiny.

To gain approval for the study, each of the other two districts required approval from the

curriculum division through the Assistant Superintendent's office. In each case, I sent

the Assistant Superintendent an email with my attached executive summary requesting

permission to visit a specific high school within the district. The Assistant

Superintendent of each school granted me approval and contacted the principal of the requested school, notifying them of my interest in conducting research at their school. Once each district granted approval to visit a specific high school, I emailed each principal an executive summary of my study as well as a recruitment letter. I followed up with a phone call to speak candidly about the process of setting up a school visit with the potential to interview five to ten willing candidates most appropriately meeting my selection criteria.

Research Participants

A combination of assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, department chairs, academic coaches, and teacher leaders were selected in each high school totaling four to seven participants per school. Selection was based on input from the principals and their ultimate recommendation of qualified participants in their school. Stable principal leadership (as indicated in Table 2) was defined by a sitting principal of at least two years in their current school. Gaining the perspectives and thoughts of administrators, curriculum facilitators, academic coaches, department chairs, and teacher leaders provided a comprehensive study of instructional practices and professional culture with a variety of opinions shared. With the EVAAS growth status based on standardized test scores from the three specific subjects of math 1, English 2, and biology, it was important that teachers in each school represented those subject areas.

At Lincoln Senior High, Mr. Jones, the principal was very accommodating and agreed to an interview. He was also agreeable to his two assistant principals participating in the study so long as they did not have to deal with a discipline incident or school safety

concern. In addition, as part of the interview, I observed Mr. Perkins facilitating an in-house professional development session and then conducted a more personal conversation following his presentation to the small group of teachers on their planning period. Finally, I met with two biology teachers and a math 1 teacher to round out the seven interviews at Lincoln Senior High.

At Washington High, despite a conversation on the phone and a copy of the executive summary in his email inbox, Mr. Moss chose to set up my visit in his own manner. Mr. Moss agreed to sit down for a limited interview, providing the administrator's perspective in his building but would not allow me to interview anyone else on his administrative team. Further, representatives from Washington High's curriculum support team were not a part of my study, only a panel of teachers. The panel consisted of teachers representing the English department (English 2/4), the math department (Foundations of Math 1/Math 1), the world languages department (Spanish), the social studies department (World/American History), and the cultural arts department (Theater Arts). As mentioned, the panel of six teachers were allowed to meet with me in an administrative conference room.

At Adams High, another accommodating principal welcomed my visit but was in a unique situation. Mr. Simmons was recently moved to the high school, completing his first year as principal of the school. To gather the most historical perspective and a more in-depth study of the practices and approaches from the administration, he recommended I interview his long-standing assistant principal, Dr. Clapp. In addition to Dr. Clapp, Mr. Simmons arranged interviews with his curriculum facilitator, a math 1 teacher, and an

English 2 teacher. Table 3 summarizes the participants and their roles at each of the three

selected high schools. All names are pseudonyms to provide anonymity.

Table 3

Names and Roles of the Participants in Three Selected "Exceeds Expected Growth"

Piedmont Triad High Schools

Name	Position
Lincoln Senior High School	
Calvin Jones	Principal
Beverly Ring	Assistant Principal
Dave Rogers	Assistant Principal
George Perkins	Instructional Program Specialist
Kristy Bloom	Biology Teacher
Nancy Norris	Biology Teacher
Chloe Parks	Math Teacher
Washington High School	
Chandler Moss	Principal
Maddie Hearn	Theater Arts Teacher
Kristen Ogle	Math Teacher
Craig Stern	English Teacher
Shelly Pratt	Spanish Teacher
Sam Eldridge	English Teacher
Kelly Rudd	Social Studies Teacher
Adams High School	
Patty Clapp	Assistant Principal
Charlotte Marks	Curriculum Facilitator
Wanda Braxton	Math Teacher
Nina Watkins	English Teacher

Data Collection

Data collection in this study consisted of in-depth interviews intended to last sixty to ninety minutes with principals, assistant principals, curriculum facilitators, academic coaches, department chairs, and teacher leaders. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and semi-structured, containing open-ended questions with the potential for additional questions or follow-up questions evolving through the interview process.

In addition to interviews, building leaders, for the most part, were full of pride offering an informal tour of the building filled with conversation about the school, its students, and some of the expectations for students and staff. Therefore, data collection also included informal observation through the building walks. I recorded field notes based on the informal walkthroughs at each high school.

At Lincoln Senior High School, in conjunction with an interview, I observed a professional development session led by the instructional program specialist. Prior to the one-on-one interview with the IPS, I took field notes based on a forty-five-minute professional development session with select teachers on their planning period.

Lincoln Senior High building tour. Mr. Jones, principal at Lincoln Senior High, was excited to take me on an informal tour of the facility describing changes in the physical makeup of the building as well as some of the wonderful programs and accolades of the school. Conversation centered on student involvement, course offerings, and the positive attributes of the staff. Walking and talking took us through the entire building including hallways, the gymnasium, the weight room, the cafeteria, and several classroom spaces.

Washington High building tour. At Washington High, Mr. Moss granted me permission to visit the campus if I was interested. I took him up on the offer, but given the fact that it was an early release day for students and staff and I was a visitor on campus, I chose not to wander around for too long. As a result, field notes from my observations of the school with limited students on campus were recorded but less comprehensive than that of Lincoln and Adams High.

Adams High building tour. Dr. Clapp, assistant principal, made me feel welcome, and following our **i**nterview showed off a few of the areas of the school in proximity of her office, including the student services department, media center, instructional facilitator's office, and several classroom spaces. Given the fact that I had interviews lined up with two teachers on the second floor of the building, it was understood that I would get an informal tour of each of the areas surrounding a math teacher and an English teacher. Both teachers provided some background on their departments and room locations prior to each interview.

Interviews at Lincoln Senior High. My visit to Lincoln High was spread over two days. Mr. Jones, the principal, set up interviews with his teaching staff during their planning periods which took place in the media center. On the first day visit, he chose to take me on an informal tour prior to meetings with his math and biology teachers. Arriving at 8 a.m., I patiently waited on Mr. Jones who was behind closed doors with a parent. Close to 8:30 a.m., I was back in his office and we formally met and discussed my study. After some conversation about his school and experiences as a principal, we went on an informal tour of the building. After the tour, Mr. Jones showed me to a quiet

spot in the media center to interview a math 1 teacher and two of his biology teachers. Each meeting lasted roughly one hour with open and frank discussion about the classroom practices and strategies of each.

The second day visit to Lincoln Senior High started with an observation of a planning period meeting facilitated by the Instructional Support Specialist. He conducted the professional development for half of the planning period (45 minutes) and devoted the latter forty-five minutes to a personal conversation with me. Following the interview with Mr. Perkins, I was able to interview the assistant principals prior to the lunch waves, as supervision of the cafeteria and its surrounding areas would be a priority. Fortunately, meeting with Ms. Ring and Dr. Rogers in the front office was free from interruption or incident regarding negative student behavior. The interview lasted roughly an hour as a result. Culminating my visit at Lincoln High, Mr. Jones agreed to sit down in his office after a morning of meetings at the central office. Waiting patiently, Mr. Jones returned later than expected but was willing to devote an hour of his time to talk more about the school in a formal interview session.

Interviews at Washington High. The principal at Washington High invited me to his school on an early release day for students and staff. Instead of engaging in professional development, a panel of teachers was selected to meet with me after students let out. Prior to my interview with the panel of teachers, Mr. Moss granted me a thirty-minute window of time for a personal interview. Arriving early in the afternoon, I eagerly waited to meet the principal, as time was a factor. As I sat in the waiting area of the front office, Mr. Moss walked through about the time of our scheduled appointment.

He had a student with him letting me know that he would just be a minute. After a few minutes, Mr. Moss returned to greet me and escorted me back to his office. Sticking to the strict timeline, we met for the thirty minutes and I did my best to cram all of my questions into a shorter than anticipated window of time.

Following my interview with Mr. Moss, I met with a panel of teachers selected by Mr. Moss to meet with me in the adjacent conference room. Six teachers representing five different departments shared in the responses to my questions. Interestingly, when we approached about an hour of rich conversation, Mr. Moss re-entered and asked if I had any final thoughts for his teachers. I took the cue and wrapped up the discussion with one last question for the group.

With the interview format limited to a panel of teachers, data collection was less comprehensive than that of Lincoln Senior High and Adams High. Although each participant spoke candidly about their roles and responsibilities contributing to the academic growth of students, this was a less intimate session to tease out more personalized thoughts and ideas. As a result, this caused an emergent design change in my research protocol. Follow-up interviews via email took place to remove any restriction on time and provide an opportunity for individualized thoughts from the participants that may not have been shared in front of the panel.

Interviews at Adams High. At Adams High, I spent an entire school day with four different participants. Upon arrival to the school, I went to the student services offices as the principal was in a district meeting for the day. From the student services office, Ms. Watkins offered to come down from her room to show me back to the

location of our interview. In her room, Ms. Watkins answered my questions openly, shared artifacts within her room, and displayed snippets of data to help drive our conversation. We met for about an hour consuming most of her planning period. She then walked me back downstairs to the office of their curriculum facilitator, Ms. Marks.

Ms. Marks was a former English teacher, now serving in the role of curriculum facilitator for Adams High. Her office was spacious with a large round table for teacher collaboration and PLC meetings. We spent just under an hour at the round table discussing the ins and outs of her role as it relates to supporting teacher and promoting academic growth in all students.

Following Ms. Marks interview, I ended up back in the student services office where assistant principal, Dr. Clapp agreed to meet with me. Being a good host, she gave me a brief tour of the building, describing the changes and additions that have gone on over the years. Dr. Clapp is a long-standing teacher at Adams High and had spent the last eight years as an administrator in the building. She was well-versed in the school history. Between the informal conversation, formal interview, and brief tour we spent about ninety minutes together talking about Adams High and strategies for good teaching and learning.

After a break for lunch, I ended the day meeting with Ms. Braxton, a math 1 teacher, during her fourth block planning period. Ms. Braxton also came downstairs to meet me in the student services office. We returned to her room and similar to the other interviews spent about an hour in the interview process.

Summary of interviews and follow-up interviews. All in all, between two days at Lincoln High, a half a day at Washington High, and one day at Adams High, I captured roughly 18 hours of data through informal conversations, building tours, and formal interviews. As a result, I chose to contact each participant offering a follow-up interview via email to capture each of their thoughts free from a time restriction. Of the 18 participants, half of them responded to follow-up prompts via email. The prompts consisted of four questions in addition to an open-ended question providing each participant an opportunity to share a reaction, thought, or anything else from the recent interview. The four prompts were:

- What activities, strategies, or thinking routines are you using to show or draw out what students are thinking about?

- What is the greatest challenge you face in the classroom today as it pertains to student achievement and academic growth?

- Elaborate on how shared decision making supports high academic growth in your building?

- Are there some "rules to live by" that you would agree are best for all students as it pertains to continual improvement?

Analysis of the Data

Qualitative data analysis is about identifying themes, categories, patterns, or answers to research questions (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). "Since as a qualitative analyst you do not have a statistical test to help tell you when an observation or pattern is significant, you must rely first on your own sense making, understandings, intelligence,

experience, and judgment" (Patton, 2015, p. 572). As a first step to making sense of my field notes and interview transcripts, I read and re-read highlighting important threads and comments as I went. I took notes in the margins jotting down key phrases or terms related to the conceptual framework. To aid in future analysis and write-up of the study, I coded using terms that directly or indirectly related to principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture wherever each surfaced in the readings. Throughout the coding process, I began to use the conceptual framework to look for codes and categories that could be placed into themes.

The process of consolidating, reducing, and interpreting the data from the three high schools became overwhelming, so I created research memos (Merriam, 2009) pertaining to administrators, teachers, and curriculum facilitators. The research memos helped organize my thoughts and the combined thoughts of educators in each of the schools. The research memos consisted of a title (administrators, teachers, or curriculum facilitators), a description of what was happening in the interview accounts (including the codes and categories), the connections and comparisons that could be made between the data and codes, or the codes and categories, conjectures that could be made, any gaps in the analysis, and a final section on questions or possible reflections regarding a code or category. Breaking down the thoughts and ideas through the research memo process helped organize my thoughts and manage consolidating the data.

Analysis of the data did not lead to barriers or unique themes that could be considered outliers. If so, those barriers or unique themes would have been examined, as

well as any silences that existed from my personal experience as a high school principal. Although there were differing philosophies on best practices and the use of and transparency of student data, a great deal of valuable information from each school's participants provided insight into how they were achieving academic growth in students.

Data Security

All information shared by school personnel remained confidential and secured password protected on a laptop. Consent forms, field notes, or research memos written by the researcher were used for this study only and were kept locked up in a file cabinet. I saved and stored written documents through The Box, the secure online storage cloud at UNCG. I conducted interviews at each of the three selected Piedmont Triad high schools in a location of the host school's choice.

Researcher Subjectivity

As a practicing high school principal, I assume responsibility for the growth and achievement of the students in our school. In order for students to succeed, I need to surround myself with great people who can motivate and inspire each and every student to prosper. A priority in my leadership role has been to build teacher capacity to best meet the unique needs of all students. In a community in which the majority of our parents are supportive and involved in their child's education, proficiency and growth should be attainable from one year to the next. Without focusing on the change in curriculum due to the Common Core, it is noticeable that our high school (based on EVAAS data from math 1, English 2, and biology) has gone from exceeds expected growth to meets expected growth, to does not meet expected growth in three years' time.

Proficiency ratings are increasing at our feeder middle school but a discernible difference is not as significant in comparison to the average growth status. I am left to ponder what ways we can academically improve our students to achieve greater success from one year to the next. Of note, teacher turnover has been a concern at our high school within the EOC subjects of math 1, English 2, and biology. As a result, use of common assessments to collect and analyze student data to help determine each student's progress has been inconsistent and unorganized. In addition, with middle school students performing at a fairly high level, reaching the predicted scores of many of the students is a challenge we have not met.

In a time of great change, with varying access to technology and classroom resources, and demanding curricula for teachers, building administrators and support staff face great challenges. Reflecting on what is in the best interest of students is critical. I believe in building teacher capacity to support the variety of needs that students present each day in our classrooms. Having only been a principal in one district and one building for the past six years, I am only aware of the practices and programs that are most beneficial to our student population. I am also familiar with our model of executing professional learning communities within like subject areas.

According to Merriam and Tisdale (2015),

> Deciding what is important—what should or should not be attended to when collecting and analyzing data—is almost always up to the investigator. Opportunities thus exist for excluding data contradictory to the investigator's views. Sometimes these biases are not readily apparent to the researcher. Nor are there practical guidelines for all situations a researcher might face. (p. 264)

As a high school principal, I have a strong bias toward developing people and building

teacher capacity rather than examining the programs and practices that are implemented

daily. Stretching myself to go outside of my comfort zone, examining other principals,

instructional support leaders, and teacher leaders, helped me be open to differences in

opinion, practice, and thought. To summarize my familiarity with technology, I would be

considered a digital immigrant. I can certainly learn from a digital native (the student)

and see this as an opportunity for personal growth in how I make sense of the 21st-

Century teaching and learning environment. I am eager to learn new strategies and 21st-

Century tools that are helping students on a personal level turn weaknesses into strengths.

Examining how teachers and instructional leaders are maintaining a balance between the

effective use of technology and student mastery of the course standards intrigues me.

Stretching my learning by getting outside of my comfort zone and the practices that I am

most familiar with in the setting in which I work, is of great benefit to me. Being open

minded and inspired to learn new ideas will help positively shape my analysis. Exposure

and study of three schools successfully achieving academic growth helps me both

personally and professional in my role. Interpreting what is happening in three other

schools allows me to compare and contrast current practices and structures that are

meeting the unique needs of all students.

  To buffer my bias as a high school principal, I took a humble approach to each

interview. I admitted that the high school in which I work had not met the mark in

achieving academic growth in all students from one year to the next in hopes that

interviewees would be open and honest in their responses. I did not want a teacher or

curriculum facilitator to fear that their responses would get back to their boss. Similarly, I approached the principal and assistant principal interviews with the premise that I hoped to learn from them not use their responses as leverage to compare and contrast philosophies and routines among building leaders.

Trustworthiness

Three high schools in different districts in the Piedmont Triad region provided unique perspectives and experiences from that of the researcher. I conducted in-depth interviews to gather evidence and develop themes about how principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture were implemented in high growth high schools. The thick, rich, descriptive data that interviewees candidly provided added credibility to the study. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) point out, findings should be "sufficiently authentic…that I may trust myself in acting on their implications" (p. 238). Each interviewee was honest and dependable and there is transferability of the data for use by other instructional leaders and teachers in pursuit of successful academic growth of students.

Following the interview data collection process, I conducted member checks by providing a written transcript of the data collected to each individual I interviewed in order to validate whether or not the individual agreed with my interpretation of the data. Member checks are "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstandings of what you observed" (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 126-127).

To further increase the credibility of the findings, I observed a professional development session in one high school as well as informally receive a walkthrough tour of two out of three high schools. Although I did not receive a guided building tour at one of the high schools, I toured the building at my leisure. As the researcher, I made every effort to engage myself in the school that I was visiting through observation and the interview process therefore using my view from the principalship as a data collection instrument.

As a practice, I wrote important information down to help keep myself organized. In a similar fashion, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the interview and informal observation process. The reflexive journal helped provide a checks and balances system to avoid misconstruing information from either an interview or an observation. I found this to be a useful strategy for personal growth through self-reflection and transparency and to help examine some of my personal assumptions and goals. For example, the journal was sectioned into field notes, interview notes, and significant experiences or observations. The field notes captured the sights, sounds, and observations of the school through the informal building tours. The interview notes summarized who, what, when, and where regarding each of the school's participants. The significant experiences or observations highlighted any unique, remarkable, or noteworthy practices or procedures. In all, the reflexive journal helped me track and document the experiences and encounters within each high school.

This research study benefited teachers, principals, and central office personnel who are interested in finding ways to motivate and inspire students to improve and

achieve academic success from one year to the next. Interviewing and spending time with instructional leaders in schools that are excelling academically, gathering their thoughts and strategies as it relates to what instructional supports are working well and considering those that are not impacting student achievement are healthy examples of what makes a reflective practitioner.

Summary of the Methodology

"Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23). I was once told that I can only know that which I personally experience. Immersing myself in the study through analysis of the instructional practices and professional culture of three high schools consistently achieving high growth, was an experience that I anticipated with excitement to grow both personally and professionally as a life-long learner.

Schools and school districts face a variety of problems and challenges and questions persist as to how and why some achieve long-term success. Identifying themes within schools led to answers or discoveries as to what motivates students to perform to a high standard from one year to the next. As a high school principal, I understand the chaotic and complex environment that encompasses the life of an administrator. Given the current statewide emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability, student achievement is an essential focus for all stakeholders. My interview-based study in three public Piedmont Triad high schools focused on gathering data through the lens of principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making,

instructional practices, and professional culture, a timely and significant study with the emphasis being placed on an accountability model that captures the academic growth and achievement of all students in public high schools.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Schools and school districts face a variety of problems and challenges and questions persist as to how some schools achieve long-term success. Given the current state-wide emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability, student achievement and academic growth is an essential focus for all stakeholders. Identifying themes within and among high schools may lead to answers or discoveries as to what motivates students to perform to a high standard showing academic improvement from one year to the next.

I studied three Piedmont Triad high schools. For each high school, a background summary will describe important characteristics, including a breakdown of the staff, the physical makeup of the building, notable routines, and other established procedures. Within the framework of principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture, I will describe and analyze participant responses and informal observations. Voices, descriptions, and analysis are based on in-depth interviews, informal observations, and follow-up interviews.

Each high school had its own mystique and character. Personalities and practices were similar but not the same. I intend to portray each high school in all its glory through descriptive analysis, personal stories, and reflections from the participants about what they perceive is working to promote academic success in students. I will spotlight each

high school providing a context for how each supported a culture of academic growth and high expectations in all students. Then, in Chapter V, I will merge the thoughts and practices of each high school into a collection of themes. Synthesizing the instructional leadership supports, shared instructional decision making practices, instructional methods, and professional culture of each high school will make a strong argument for how high schools can meet the unique needs of all learners to promote academic growth in students.

Lincoln Senior High School

Background

Located in a rural section of the Piedmont Triad region, Lincoln Senior High School houses approximately 1,250 students and 67 certified classroom teachers. Although the building appears to be well maintained, it was built in the late 1960s and overcrowding is a concern. Recent renovations have taken place to repurpose existing space, adding additional classrooms to meet the needs of a growing population.

Upon my arrival, the front office was busy with late-arriving students who drove themselves to school. The adults were friendly and approachable and did their best to check in the students and send them off to class. One of the assistant principals was heading out to complete some informal classroom walkthroughs while a second assistant principal was on his way to the student parking lot to address a concern. Both took the time to introduce themselves and welcome me to the school.

Lincoln Senior High is designed like a large block with the cafeteria, commons, media center and gymnasium as the central hub surrounded by classroom spaces and

CTE laboratories. Students wear lanyards signifying permission to use the bathroom, leave class, or run an errand for a teacher. Class sizes range from 25 to 35 students with four 90-minute blocks and four lunch waves within third block class. Some classrooms follow a traditional approach lined with rows of desks whereas other spaces contain tables with Chromebooks assigned to individual students. Although the school has not adopted a 1:1 laptop to student ratio, Chromebook carts are shared among staff. The media center also provides a set of 30 desktops for teachers to sign up for on a need basis.

Outside of the main building is a newly renovated weight room and auxiliary gym area. The day of my visit this space was filled with males and females working out to loud music through a variety of fitness exercises. With a strong athletic program and a variety of clubs and school organizations, the extra-curricular involvement of many students was apparent. Collectively, from the principal and his staff to the students, there appears to be a great deal of pride in the school.

Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

Principal and assistant principal structure, supports, and priorities.

High standards for excellence. According to Calvin Jones, third-year principal of Lincoln High School, a consistent message resonates from central office:

> When I got here we were low in some areas. We had an assistant superintendent that came in to our school and said, "These scores matter." There's an expectation of excellence, so I met with every teacher and said, your scores matter, make some changes.

The master schedule at Lincoln is designed to accommodate for weekly PLC meetings outside of teachers' common lunchtimes. At the beginning of the year the

administration and Instructional Program Specialist helped PLC's set norms for their meetings. In the words of Greg Perkins, Instructional Program Specialist, "We made them set norms. One was everybody gets five minutes to talk. Another was everybody was responsible for bringing student data. Every meeting is about an instructional strategy or formative assessment data. One of us is always there."

As an administration, the goal was to stay positive focusing on improving instruction and support of teachers. As building leaders, they try to be positive in all that they do, avoiding micromanaging the professionals in the building and working to provide all teachers with opportunities for personal development and growth in their subject area.

A priority of Mr. Jones is building trust, both personal and professional, which he refers to as the emotional bank account. "Supports I am trying to do are build teacher's emotional bank account, not micromanaging people within the confines of what I have to do, and get people more opportunities for staff development on their level." Mr. Jones feels that just like students, teachers will perform to higher levels when they feel valued as professionals and there exists an atmosphere of mutual trust between administration and staff.

Timely and purposeful feedback. To support and monitor teacher's adherence to the PLC structures, high expectations for students, and alignment to content standards, Mr. Jones's team conducts a minimum of eight documented walkthrough observations of each teacher in every department within the school during a school year. A calendar describing the departmental responsibility, through a Google sheet, defines each

administrator's task on a weekly basis so that the three are not visiting the same rooms at the same time.

During these walkthroughs, administration expects to see a common vocabulary being used by all teachers to maintain appropriate structure and pacing with high expectations for all students. Avoiding fact recall and exercises that kept students on the remembering and understanding levels is a priority. In reference to the walkthroughs, Dr. Rogers, assistant principal, talked about making thinking visible with a laser-like focus on classroom instruction among the administrative team:

> We are getting better at being specific with our feedback. We all notice things—to kind of sandwich that feedback has a big impact. It's a culture of expectations. There's a common vocabulary being used by everyone. It's a connection to the standards. A lot of people identify rigor with extra work and it's not really extra work, it's the level, it's the complexity of the text involved. It's the type of questions that you ask—more than just recall.

Teachers challenging students through high levels of questioning with rich discussion and discourse is an expectation of all teachers across all disciplines fostering students to evaluate, analyze, or synthesize information. Further, administration challenges all teachers to maintain relevance in their lesson planning as Mr. Jones reflected in a math 1 walkthrough experience, "I was doing a math walkthrough and the students were discussing x and y intercepts, parallel lines versus perpendicular lines and there was a feeling that for the kids on my right, how is this relevant?" Keeping students inspired and hungry to learn is important to the administration and many of their conversations with teachers focus on student engagement rather than just plowing through the curriculum.

Teacher leadership supports and structure.

Collaboration and collegiality. Ms. Norris, a biology teacher, shared, "We meet every day after school planning and go through our daily formative assessments. I feel like a lot of our success is just our working relationship." Lincoln Senior High teachers individually and collectively influence their colleagues and others in the community in positive ways. Striving to continually get better, teachers work tirelessly to prepare engaging and relevant lesson plans. Another biology teacher, Ms. Bloom added:

> And just having the mentality of, it's not just my kids, it's not just my test scores, it's our school scores, and we want Lincoln to be the best. I think that, it drives you, I mean it really takes a village. We do look at individual data, but it very much is as a school how did we do? And so, if my scores are strong and her scores are strong and the third person's scores are not, okay, let's go approach, not attack, but let's approach and figure out how we get you where we are because we need to look good as a school.

Mentoring and modeling is very much a part of the school community—no teacher feels as though they are on an island. Teachers take a collective responsibility to improve instruction within their content areas. Sharing ideas, comparing notes, discussing student data is commonplace all for the betterment of the school. Ms. Parks, an experienced math teacher stated, "I say, 'here's my stuff—take it, change it.' We are all doing this for the kids. We share, no one's going to be hiding their stuff."

Rigor and relevance—leading by example. Lincoln Senior High teachers reflect on their practice—they want to be the best. For example, Ms. Parks said, "I'm just one of those teachers that won't sleep at night if it's not going the way I want it to go, and I'll

just think about it and worry about it, and revamp it until I can figure it out, until I can get it going the way I want it to go."

A real challenge for teachers is taking all of the data they have available and adjusting or adapting their instructional methods to meet the needs of all students. Curricula are written under the assumption that students are entering class prepared to handle the level or rigor that the course required. In reality, teachers have to slow down and teach basic skills before they can focus on the rigorous standards. Lincoln High teachers are adept at differentiating their lessons to meet the varying student needs. There is a level of high expectations combined with adequate support for all learners.

Shared Instructional Decision Making

Curriculum support through the Instructional Program Specialist.

Engagement and pedagogy. As an instructional coach, George Perkins envisions authentic engagement in every classroom in which students are required to think and carry on relevant and meaningful conversation. He believes that preparation for class is a teacher's first and foremost priority. "How authentic is your classroom, are you spending all of your time giving kids fact-based knowledge through lecture? What do scientists really do and how many times do students in our building have the opportunity to do those things?"

Within subject areas, teachers know their content standards inside and out and build their activities and routines around that. Alignment to standards is critical, and building everything around the standards has led to student success at Lincoln Senior High.

Teacher accountability. As a former social studies teacher, Mr. Perkins noted that he was never held accountable for student learning by his administration or central office curriculum support staff. "I couldn't prove to you that Sally was thinking in my classroom. She was awake. But I really couldn't prove that she wasn't thinking about last Friday night."

Mr. Perkins, along with the administration and lead teachers worked together to develop a walkthrough form in an effort to help support teachers and hold them accountable. The walkthrough form centers around five standards:

- higher order thinking;

- depth of knowledge;

- substantive conversation;

- connectedness to the real world;

- social support.

A Google form with check boxes contains the specific look-fors related to each of the five standards, and allows for immediate feedback. In addition, there is a place for the observer to make comments. Mr. Perkins is a lifelong learner. "If I can't think of anything to add, that's when I go home and study, trying to find something that I can give them later. That shows them that you care about learning and instruction."

As a rule, consistency is important to the school and district. The five standards drive instruction and remain constant from the beginning of the school year to the end of the school year. The curriculum facilitator and school administrators then pick up where

they left off and work on teacher strengths and weaknesses from feedback related to the five standards for the following year.

Collaborative in-house professional development. To maintain focus on the five standards of authentic instruction, Mr. Perkins facilitates monthly share sessions during each of the four ninety-minute blocks, gathering teachers from a variety of subject areas to the media center on their planning period. Every meeting has an instructional strategy as a focus so that teachers may reflect on how they are planning their next unit and designing the necessary formative assessments.

As part of my interview with Mr. Perkins, I observed a 45-minute planning period session that provided teachers with a routine for connecting new ideas to prior knowledge. Adopted from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, Mr. Perkins discussed visible thinking and classroom practices that help make thinking visible to students. The session focused on the ideas:

- Connect: how were the ideas and information presented connected to what students already know?
- Extend: what new ideas did you get that extended or pushed your thinking in new directions?
- And challenge: what was still challenging or confusing for you to get your mind around?

 "We're trying to dig deeper. You saw the teachers go deeper—we will continue to push them to go deeper." Ultimately, Mr. Perkins described this connect/extend/challenge strategy as a way to ensure students were making connections between new

ideas and prior knowledge, ponder ongoing questions that they had, and reflect on what they were learning.

Mr. Perkins urges teachers to focus on avoiding or removing barriers to student engagement and learning by focusing on instruction. He encourages teachers to ensure students understand the relevancy of school and learning at-hand, the learning environment is a safe place for students, and all students understand school and classroom expectations and the consequences for violating those rules. Consistency with professional development and sticking to ideas centered on any one of the five standards from the walkthrough tool over the course of several years was a commitment that the school had made.

Through thorough lesson planning and frequent formative assessment, Mr. Perkins urges teachers to show their students how much they cared about their learning. Getting all teachers to love students enough to want to spend extra time planning was no easy task. If the planning time was invested, Mr. Perkins believed the academic growth of students would flourish. Mr. Perkins preaches that preparation and committing time to meet the unique needs of all students would stretch one's learning. It takes time, energy, and personal drive to constantly reflect and improve instruction to always get better at what one was doing.

Instructional Practices

Intentional planning. A great deal of student success related to academic growth can be attributed to the working relationship of the teachers at Lincoln Senior High School. The teachers set high expectations for themselves and set structures that make

sense to students in order to provide consistency and organization to the classroom. Ms.

Bloom shared:

> Our planning is very, very intentional—just carrying around those standards and having them visible at all points and just going through and making sure that everything is checked off and that everything we do in class you can tie back to a very specific reason where we really focus on what's in the standards.

Teachers are very aware of their standards and their lesson plan design shows the

connection between class activities and the standards. A common understanding or

agreement exists in that each teacher assumes the responsibility of doing what is best for

students. Sharing is a common practice within subject areas and there was little hiding of

one's lesson plans. With a great deal of pride among staff, collaboration and passing

along success stories or lessons that didn't go well occurred frequently promoting a

positive culture among departments. Ms. Norris said, "It's collective, intentional

planning, the refusal to let students slip. You're not going to make an A on everything,

but if I can get you even from a 35 to a 56, that is growth."

Within the biology PLC, teachers devoted a great deal of time unpacking the

biology standards to create a notebook that contained activities, group work, study

guides, manipulatives, lab activities, formative assessments, and homework assignments

tied to each standard in the course. Phase one of the design focuses on creating a

collaborative notebook that transforms how students take notes. The interactive design

allows for more student discussion and manipulation of the content rather than direct

instruction from the teacher with students copying notes. Phase two of the collaborative

notebook design includes the common assessment piece. Students are pre-assessed for

each unit, daily assessment occurs in the form of informal formative assessment, e.g.,

ticket out the door, daily data analysis with three-tiered student groupings based on

mastery of the content, more formal formative and summative assessment, as well as a

dead period for remediation and re-teaching.

Formative assessment and tracking student data. Frequent or daily assessment

to identify what students learned from a lesson drives Lincoln Senior High EOC teachers

to constantly evaluate and analyze individual student data. In Ms. Park's math 1

classroom, teachers have adapted their note taking process to meet the needs of their

students.

> I found out that if I wait on them, I could spend ten minutes waiting on them to
> copy down a problem. We give them an outline of the notes so they don't have
> to. We can just fill in the process, help in their thought process, and make notes
> about what we are doing.

A system of note cards, roughly 38 in total, drives the semester's body of work

for Ms. Parks. Each notecard relates to a standard or substandard for the math 1 course in

the order that she feels best suits the students. Students start with a warm-up each day

and word problems are usually the focus to train students to read for information,

highlight key words, and familiarize themselves with the math 1 vocabulary. To

maintain a structure that students could relate to, all notes are written on white paper

while anything required to be turned in would be on colored paper. Therefore, students

have three main sections in their notebook—warm-ups, notes on white paper, and a

variety of collected work assignments on colored paper.

Ms. Parks gives frequent quizzes to track student progress and notes are allowed to be used when taking a quiz. By allowing notes on quizzes, Ms. Parks found that students took better notes and realized that there was purpose behind the notes because they could look back and review the processes for solving problems.

Although most of the daily formative assessments in the math 1 classroom ask students to put a pencil to paper, students are not always sitting at their desk with pencil in hand. Activities are designed to get students moving around the room several times a week and technology is used to engage and assess students on a personalized level. Teacher created Kahoot! assessments or Quizizz activities gauge student understanding. Further, to more personalize student learning, Ms. Parks utilizes Castle Learning to allow students the opportunity to assess and re-assess until they reach mastery of the content.

In the biology department, daily formative assessments are very specific and student-centered. The teachers take every question on each test and tie it to a standard proving their effort to intentionally plan and provide data-driven instruction. Through an Apperson scanner, the biology teachers scan assessments to gather data on student progress. The results from the scanner show an item analysis as well as whole class percentages on proficiency. The biology teachers used the data to determine weak or strong areas within the unit, while the students received feedback on how well they were mastering each of the standards in a unit. More specifically, Ms. Bloom stated:

> We have this scanner that breaks down everything. So I can look at a student and see that for standard 1.21 they were 93% proficient. Sometimes the data doesn't look that good. And so, we decided to do a "dead period." The day after a quiz, we do not teach anything new, but we go over the quiz, do an in-class remediation, and then gave the kids an opportunity to re-quiz.

The biology teacher reported that substantive conversation focused on the curriculum significantly increased in classrooms. While students evaluate their right and wrong answers, the teacher encourages students to reflect on why they missed the question and whether or not something was misread or forgotten. As a result of the discourse related to the assessment, the teachers learn a great deal about the students and their mastery of the content, and the students learn about themselves and their areas of strength and weakness in the subject matter.

Teaching for mastery. Allowing students to retest or improve a test score was happening in both the math 1 settings and biology classrooms, although they looked different.

As mentioned, the biology teachers used the "dead period" to remediate and retest. Baseline mastery is set at 80% proficiency. If a student does not receive at least an 80 on the original test, he or she has to retest. The original score remains in the grade book with the retest counting if it was an improved grade. The retest serves as a way to get extra credit, the only way for a student to bring up their quiz or test grade.

In Math 1 students are afforded the opportunity to improve their grade through test corrections. Students can receive half of their points missed back by coming before or after school to work with the teacher on a one-on-one basis. With the retake opportunity or grade improvement potential, comparison between the original and new assessment often showed growth.

By providing opportunities to master standards, the students at Lincoln Senior

High recognize that the teachers care about them; thus, they are likely to put in the extra

effort. As a result, students take more ownership for their learning.

Sharing students. Math 1 and biology students were often shared among

classrooms. For instance, between the three biology teachers, students relocate for the

first twenty to thirty minutes of the class period based on their mastery of a topic. Ms.

Norris explained, "We trade kids at the beginning of the period. She takes the high, he

takes the medium, and I take the low. And we would mix it up and focus on instruction

needed for that day in each group."

The teachers rotate their responsibilities so that they can meet with each of the

different groups throughout the semester. In most cases, students do not want to fall in

the lower category. Not wanting to be in the low group has driven students to take more

ownership for their learning and perform to their highest potential.

Professional Culture

Teacher recognition and positive staff morale. In an effort to kick off the year

on a positive note, Mr. Jones set up a staff retreat. The day consisted of team building

activities interspersed between free time for the staff to enjoy recreation activities like

kayaking, putt-putt, fishing, horseshoes, and corn hole. Getting teachers outside of their

classroom environment allowed them to socialize with colleagues in a relaxed

atmosphere developing positive thoughts and feelings among staff.

> We started the year by taking the whole staff down to a nearby Salvation Army
> camp. We bused the staff and they were not told where they were going. My
> goal was to have a fresh start. Everybody got a t-shirt, we spent a lot of time

talking about what we need as far as an atmosphere that is supportive and positive. I am trying to do some things on a social emotional level to help to get know people, make people feel good, and try to support them along the way.

To continue the positive vibe throughout the year, the administration also does internal shout-outs recognizing the great things that are going on in the classrooms. Assistant principal, Ms. Ring, commented, "It's inspiring. We do shout-outs, walking around excited to spread a positive message. Oh my gosh, you've got to go see what is happening! And people love that." The transparency of the internal shout-outs fosters additional competitiveness within the staff and helps teachers see what may be happening outside of their classroom in a variety of content areas.

In addition to the internal shout-outs, a web posting called the Lincoln Ledger highlighted notable shout-outs, positive classroom activities, school announcements, teacher recognitions, student recognitions, etc., building a school community in which all felt valued and appreciated.

Build trust. Staff at Lincoln Senior High make a concerted effort to ensure each and every student feels welcome in the school. Regardless of the classroom or level (honors versus standard), teachers put forth their best effort to motivate all students to succeed. Ms. Parks declared, "The biggest thing that I do in the beginning is to try to get my kids to trust me. I will never embarrass them for any question that they ask me, and I get that established from the get go."

Engaging all students is no easy task but teachers are authentic in their approach and purposeful in doing their best to ensure all students have an opportunity for their voice to be heard. Administration was not blind to the fact that maintaining a healthy

school culture was a complex task. Remarks from Dr. Rogers identified culture as a top priority and a continual challenge as one of the building leaders. "You need a positive culture. Culture is big for me."

      School pride. Administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff and students at Lincoln Senior High have a shared believe that they are part of something special. Mr. Jones proudly stated, "There is a very healthy sense of we want to be at the top. It's the people in the building—they are good. They care about kids and enjoy what they are doing." Students identify with the school and their teachers, which increases productivity in the classroom. They see their teachers putting in tremendous effort dedicating a great deal of time to their craft, and in turn the students do not want to disappoint.

Summary of Lincoln Senior High

      Developing a healthy culture socially and emotionally, as well as supporting high expectations for all teachers is critical to the administration of Lincoln Senior High. There is a sense of pride and competitiveness among students and staff promoting collegiality and a positive school identity among the student body. Lincoln Senior High is also innovative, not necessarily in technology adaptations, but in how teachers relentlessly plan in intentional ways to meet the needs of all students. Teachers set up a failsafe for students so that there is not an option for them to slip through the cracks. Through a system of data tracking, students are cognizant of their progress and take ownership for their learning. Noteworthy, as a professional goal each Lincoln Senior High interviewee mentioned a desire to get better, taking personal pride in professional development and ways to improve their classroom teaching and learning practices.

Lincoln Senior High teachers are data-driven and experts in their curriculum, playing a significant role in the school's exceeds growth status. They show great leadership through their mentoring of new staff, modeling of effective lesson plans, and continued efforts to grow professionally in their field. Teachers positively influenced their colleagues, administrators, and even others in the county through their ability to design engaging and relevant activities as well as collect, analyze, and use student data to improve student learning.

Washington High School

Background

Located in the northwest region of the Piedmont Triad, Washington High School is the largest high school in the county with approximately 2,200 students and over 110 certified teaching staff. A suburban community, Washington High School is located in a small town with a population under 20,000 people just off of a large interstate highway. Students are on a block schedule with four ninety-minute periods and four lunch waves built around third block class.

The campus of Washington High School has an open feel with courtyards and covered walkways leading to academic wings. Set up like a large block, the auditorium, gymnasium, and athletic fields were located toward the back of the campus with the main office and academic wings closer to the front. I visited the school on an early release day so the grounds were quieter than normal except for some extracurricular activities, including spring sports practice and rehearsal for the spring musical. The school has a strong reputation in athletics as well as a high rate of participation in school-related clubs

and organizations. Washington High is also known to have a vibrant cultural arts department with a variety of singing groups, a solid band program, and an active number of theater arts performers. There is plenty of Kelly green and yellow on campus signifying pride in the school. I felt a strong sense of a positive school climate despite the smaller number of students on campus that afternoon.

Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

> **Principal supports, structures, and priorities.**

> *High expectations for planning and checking for student understanding.*

Chandler Moss, fifth-year principal of Washington High, described the school as "Steeped in tradition and excellence in academics, athletics, and the arts." A well-rounded high school, the staff prides themselves on remaining a top institution in the county in terms of academic performance, athletic prowess, and artistic expression. Expectations are established from the top down. Administrators hold teachers accountable for their preparation for class. In the words of Mr. Moss, "I expect them to plan well, collaborate, and contribute to their professional learning teams. They need to be prepared from a content perspective. You need to know your content. If you don't, then you can't plan and you can't educate kids."

Teachers are not micromanaged—they are the content experts and expected to deliver relevant and engaging instruction each and every day, tightly aligned to the state standards. Another notable expectation was the assessment of students. Whether it was formal or informal, Mr. Moss made it very clear that his administrative team stressed the importance of checking for student understanding in all classrooms. It was imperative

that teachers knew their students, how they progressed on a daily basis, and made the necessary adjustments in planning to meet their unique needs. "Assessment—somehow, someway you have to do a check on where those kids are, whether it be formal or informal or at the end of your lesson. It goes in your lesson."

A focus on literacy across the curriculum. "What we have done this year and last is focused on literacy, utilizing the literacy strategies in the classroom. Teachers present the things they are using in their classroom. We have a staff that is high functioning." As a school-wide focus, in-house staff development focuses on literacy. More specifically, Mr. Moss highlighted two important literacy practices: use of academic vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies (e.g., activate prior knowledge, use context clues, think aloud, summarize the story, locate key words, and make predictions). Teachers collaborate and share their wealth of knowledge, contributing to improving the academic environment and building community among staff. Lead teachers, mostly in the language arts department, are counted on to spread their expertise.

Authentic professional learning teams. Structured around the school day, PLTs within like subjects meet every Tuesday and Thursday. Planning is the focus with a continued effort to support formative or summative assessment to gauge and track student understanding. Within the EOC subjects (math 1, English 2, biology), district benchmarks provide student data twice a semester. Discussing student strengths and weaknesses related to course standards drives the PLT conversation. Administration

expects teachers of like subjects to maintain the same or similar pace as well as develop

rigorous common assessments that are tightly aligned to the state standards.

To support a school-wide focus on building literacy and reading across the

curriculum, Mr. Moss and his three assistant principals utilize an in-house walkthrough

form that they created as a team. The form is electronic and provides feedback directly to

the teacher focusing on literacy strategies, level of student engagement, level of rigor,

level of questioning, and whether or not the essential question was posted and referred to

during the lesson. Walkthroughs conducted by the administrative team are performed by

department on a weekly rotational basis. One of the most important goals of the

walkthrough form is to provide specific feedback to teachers regarding their classroom

instruction. Feedback is also collected to provide trend data for use in faculty meetings to

promote reflection and gauge how well teachers are meeting the academic needs of

students.

Effective use of technology. It is critical for students to make connections and

understand why they are studying a specific standard. More specifically related to the

level of student engagement, administration demands that technology is not used for the

sake of just using it. Mr. Moss insisted, "If you are going to use technology, somehow

integrate it into the lesson so that it is actively engaging kids. For us, it's the active

engagement piece. If you use it, use it effectively not as a replacement for the text."

In addition to the use of laptops in classrooms, classroom teachers have complete

autonomy to manage student cell phones within the confines of the school and district

policy. For curriculum purposes, teachers are allowed to let students use their cell phone

as an interactive device. Although the school does not have a one-to-one laptop to student ratio, using technology when appropriate and available to support student engagement and understanding is commonplace.

Teacher instructional leadership.

Collaboration and collegiality with a student-centered focus. Collaboration is a large part of the success of Washington High. Not only do teachers strive to get better as individuals, they support the improvement of their colleagues. Mr. Stern, English teacher, said:

> If we are teaching the same class, we are not competing against each other. So, if I find something that is not working, the first thing I do is go to another teacher and say, "Help me out. What's working with you on this?" Because the goals the same and that's the difference between competing and collaborating. If you don't have a culture of collaboration, this isn't going to work. When you are collaborating and you see people working together, students pick up on that kind of thing. If you are expecting students to collaborate with each other through group sessions, they are going to be watching teachers do that same kind of thing.

Teachers are student-centered with high expectations for all. They are also realistic and know that not all students come with the same drive, motivation, and skill sets. Teachers are motivated by their students' successes and strive to give every student a way to connect. Ms. Rudd, a social studies teacher, stated:

> For the students for whom the classroom is not their comfort zone, it's difficult. If they have a place to shine, a place to feel good, that connects them to the school, and gives them a reason to do well in my class to stay in school or stay in a program—they can succeed.

Investing in students in and out of school. Teachers at Washington High are invested in the school community through coaching, mentoring, observing, and supporting students in a variety of ways. Inside and outside of school, teachers lead by example showing students they care about both the person and the student. Mr. Stern added, "You'd be surprised how many faculty show up for activities. I'm not just talking about your football games. I'm talking about plays, musicals, and lacrosse games. These students see that and respond to that." Visibility of teachers and other support staff at a variety of events, sacrificing their own time to support the students builds morale, fosters pride in the school, and supports an attitude that students mattered.

Shared Instructional Decision Making

A collective responsibility to teach all students. Teachers feel supported by the administration. Administration is accessible to teachers and works in partnership with teachers to allow them to do their job free from as much distraction as possible. Ms. Hearn, a theater arts teacher said, "There are opportunities to have your voice heard. If I have an issue or just want to run something by an administrator, we find a meeting time. So, I feel very supported in that regard."

Student behavior issues are dealt with swiftly and appropriately allowing teachers to focus on their respective curricula. Not only are there high expectations for academic progress, there were equally high expectations for student behavior. Ms. Rudd said, "When I go to an administrator about a disruptive student, the student knows that there will be consequences and an administrator is going to believe me."

There is an unwritten agreement that the entire staff takes a collective responsibility for the academic progress of all students. Ms. Hearn stated:

> I try to emphasize things they are doing in English class and things they are doing in other core classes. To try to be cross-curricular, to support other teachers, as well. I know that I am not the only elective teacher that does that. All of the elective teachers take collective responsibility for kids. I think that helps.

Not only were relationships built on respect for all content areas, teachers are willing to help each other in any way possible. Mr. Rudd explained, "Here are my activities, assessments, and lesson plans. Take what you want, don't take. Change what needs to be changed. New teachers are blown away by the amount of support provided."

School-wide school improvement goals. Teachers take seriously school-wide goals for school improvement. School improvement team members from a variety of departments meet monthly and are very aware of overall school data. Dr. Pratt, a Spanish teacher, said, "Through the school improvement team, we look at overall data. As an elective teacher, I take math scores seriously, I take history scores seriously. When we go through the data that is serious to me."

According to Washington High social studies teacher Mr. Rudd, "A staff that can implement school-wide goals and appropriate classroom goals at a high level successfully independently and cooperatively, that's the secret."

Instructional Practices

High expectations for students in all classrooms. Teachers at Washington High School take great pride in their roles and responsibilities. A ubiquitous paradigm that all

teachers embrace high expectations for their students is a driving force behind the success

of Washington High School. Mr. Stern followed up with:

> Students know that if they are stepping into a social studies class, an arts class, an English class, a foreign language class, or a CTE class, whatever the department is, that they know that they are going to be pushing themselves. That they know they have high expectations placed on them and that they will be held accountable and responsible if they are not meeting those expectations. It is impossible to skate by here at Washington.

Along with classroom rigor and high expectations for learning, teachers pride

themselves on getting to know the students first. They find ways to make an emotional

attachment to each student. Dr. Pratt said, "I think the student needs to feel welcomed,

they need to feel a part of something they are helping to build."

Formative assessment. Teachers' effective use of formative assessment

strategies promotes academic gains in all students. The forms of assessment look

different depending on the classroom.

From Ms. Ogle, the math 1 teacher:

> We use data notebooks to individualize learning with common assessment data recorded throughout the semester. Also, the use of clickers and CPS devices give us instant results on students to break down and analyze what was working well and what needed more attention in the curriculum.

From Ms. Rudd, a social studies teacher:

> Whether we use clickers, Haiku, a free-write, white boards, or thumbs up/thumbs down to check for understanding—it needs to be right then. And the technology, I don't think that makes or breaks a teacher. There are some who use it well and have good results and there are some teachers who don't use it and also have good results.

In each case, timely feedback allowed the teacher to gauge student understanding and reflect on their practices. Again, no student was allowed to fall behind or slip through the cracks with the effective use of formative assessment to track each student's progress.

Professional Culture

Involvement in the school community. A combination of parent involvement, teacher involvement, and student involvement set apart Washington High School. Teachers reach out to parents with positive contacts as well as in response to a negative classroom situation. Dr. Pratt added, "I think you have to contact parents. You have to make them a part of the school community. Because it sometimes just takes a phone call to get a kid back on track."

Parents attend events and participate in the school community through the PTSA, school clubs, or booster organizations. Many faculty members attend events such as plays, concerts, or athletic events. Washington has several clubs and activities available to students who may not find their niche in the classroom. Ms. Stern stated, "We have over 40 clubs right now and we offer every sport plus 33% of our students in the last accreditation review earned a varsity letter."

A strong sense of school involvement exists with students, teachers, and parents. Students want to be involved in clubs and extracurricular activities. Teachers want to support students academically and socially. Parents in turn want to support the school community. A healthy dose of school pride and commitment is contributing to the academic success of Washington High.

Build positive relationships. All of the teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. Every teacher makes an effort to know the students as individuals before they dive into their curriculum. Ms. Ogle stated, "We've got to form a relationship first. Even though it might not me the most exciting lesson all of the time, they respect me, they listen, and they try their hardest."

A main priority for staff is to include all students in their lesson in some fashion. Ms. Ogle mentioned, "They have some kind of emotional connection. They can see themselves as valued, either in the examples that I use, the articles that I pick, the activities that we do, or the language that I use. I think that's important." A math teacher, Ms. Ogle learned conversational Spanish to better communicate with her Latino students. She uses her Spanish to help engage and connect the students, forging a positive relationship.

Students recognized the time and effort that teachers were putting in to help each become a better student and better person. The students in turn took their schooling more seriously. They wanted to be a part of that success.

Committed student body. The people of Washington High School drive the success of the school. The commitment and dedication of the teachers rubs off on the students. The kids want to be a part of that successful path and that seems to breed the success of the school. Mr. Eldridge, another English teacher said, "The teachers are obviously professionals but the students, they take it seriously. And it's respected. It took two weeks after I first came here to hear a curse word come out of a teenager's mouth. It's just a professional environment."

Summary of Washington High School

High expectations and standards of excellence for teachers and students drives the academic success of Washington High. Teachers are passionate and willing to dedicate the necessary time and energy to support all students. Teachers engage in authentic conversation in PLTs regarding high quality teaching and learning. Technology is used to enhance learning through engaging interactive websites. With frequent formative assessment, students are held accountable for their learning and continued progress toward mastery of the content. No matter the subject, teachers take a collective effort to hold high expectations for students and their learning. This positive attitude and commitment to each child contributes greatly to the school's exceeds growth status.

Dr. Pratt, the Spanish teacher summarized Washington High's success perfectly:

It's replicable. It's not that we don't have any particular conditions, or situations, or circumstances here that are not replicable at other high schools. It's a matter of treating teachers as professionals, treating students as human beings and people, respecting their differences, respecting them as learners. Giving them opportunities and allowing us to do what we do be best. And getting the right people. I think that can happen anywhere.

A supportive and committed community backs the vision for excellence that Washington High strives to achieve. Students are involved in the school community, connected in a variety of ways through clubs, civic organizations, or athletic teams. Investment in and out of school and a strong sense of accountability promotes a positive work ethic from administration to the teachers to the students.

Adams High School

Background

The oldest of the three schools I visited, Adams High School serves around 1300 students with approximately 80 certified teaching staff. To accommodate a population increase and update the facility, Adams High School an addition was made to the gymnasium and further renovations took place in the 1990s to add additional classrooms. Interestingly, even an adjacent motel was reconfigured for alternative classroom space and to host district professional development sessions.

The school itself is a large brick building with several cement steps to large wooden front doors. There are no security cameras or special buzzer to press to gain entry into the school. The office is located immediately to the right once inside the building. This office houses the principal and his receptionist. A separate student services office contains the counselors, student support staff, and assistant principals.

Students follow a block schedule with four 90-minute classes. Three lunch waves, around 30 minutes in length, scheduled during third block can be enjoyed give students the opportunity to dine inside or outside. Students use the front courtyard and lawn to eat, play ball, or just relax, weather permitting. A lone teacher, with the support of an assistant principal supervises one lunch wave at a time, wandering around visiting with students or observing the latest pick-up soccer match.

Similar to the other high schools, routines and procedures are clearly established as evidenced by the relative calmness inside the building. Students appeared to be well mannered and trusted to behave appropriately in and out of the classroom.

Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership

Assistant principal supports, structures and priorities.

Data-driven PLCs. Administration at Adams High School takes a team approach

to their roles and responsibilities. Dr. Clapp, assistant principal, stated, "We work

together to go to PLCs and have conversations around data. Everyone is really good at

collecting data." Outside of managing student discipline, each administrator is expected

to attend PLC meetings across departments and grade levels, with a strong emphasis on

the state-tested EOC subjects. As a result, conversation aimed to stay focused around

student data and ways to support effective teaching. She added, "We come in handy

when we ask the hard questions, 'How does this align with your standards?'"

PLC's often function to create formative assessments that adequately check for

student understanding. The administrative presence in the weekly meetings motivates

teachers to reflect on how closely aligned their formative assessments are to the course

standards. The expectation is frequent use of formative assessment tightly aligned to the

standards, relatively short in length.

Follow up with feedback. Purposeful feedback is critical to inspire teachers to

reflect on their classroom practices. When observing classrooms, administrators zero in

on both teacher and student actions. Dr. Clapped said:

> I make it very purposeful when I'm doing observations. I very much try to note
> what students are doing and what teachers are doing. I'm very much a
> socioculturalist, asking teachers, "So this is what occurs in the classroom so how
> do you think the kids take that up? What are the meanings that are given out?
> Have you thought about this?" Pushing them to reflect on their practice. But also
> providing a positive comment, or a note to have a follow-up conversation.

As a follow-up to the observations and walkthroughs, a Critical Friends group was created to foster continued conversation regarding good teaching and learning. Once-a-month each department meets and each teacher brings a week's worth of lesson plans. Dr. Clapp described the session:

> They have seven minutes to review their lesson. Then there was a two-minute period where everybody else had to say what they liked and what they wondered. Then, they could respond to the likes or wonders and what it really did is it created that safe place for some of the critical feedback on content and strategy.

Feedback, both good and recognizing areas in need of improvement, pushed teachers outside of their comfort zone. Committed to promoting the academic growth of all students, teachers took ownership for their own practices and ways to improve on a personal and professional level.

Teacher leadership.

The effective use of technology. Adams High School is a 1:1 school, meaning each student is furnished with a Chromebook laptop for their personal use in and out of school. Dr. Clapp reflected, "It really made everybody reevaluate their practice. It wasn't just a matter of how you incorporate technology in your classroom, but how our teaching practice can be transformed with technology."

Access to technology allows teachers at Adams High to become more creative with their lesson plans. Students are provided more choice in assignments and are more creative in their classroom tasks. Dr. Clapp added, "You'll get creative students with a Prezi or something new. I've seen teachers using video reflection."

Whether in class using a Chromebook or outside of school with the use of one's personal smart phone, students enjoy recording a conversation, sharing their knowledge and opinions in a safe and current manner. Video reflections have provided a more personalized check for understanding with authentic feedback coming from students through their own words and thought processes. It is a great way for the teachers to get to know the students forging positive relationships with each and every one of them.

A concerted effort is made to ensure all students have access to technology and wireless capabilities should they need it. Dr. Clapp explained, "Most teachers accommodate for student access to a wireless network. Our campus is open until nine or ten o'clock at night—with games and everything else that goes on at a high school, students often sit out front on the steps and access our wireless." Through positive interactions with teachers, and activities that peek student interest, students adapt and find ways to create and incorporate technology in a lot of what they do.

High quality academic advisement. Appropriate student placement is a priority at Adams High. Dr. Clapp stated, "We very much make our teachers part of the advisement process. We did a Google Doc, shared who's registered for all the classes next year, and then have hard conversations with students that may not be ready for certain classes." Despite the fact that parents may override a school recommendation, critical conversations are happening with the students on a one-on-one basis to help ensure students are being challenged as well as placed in a level that will support their success.

Modeling best practices. Ms. Watkins, an English teacher, stated, "I could just pull up the agendas from last semester and then just copy and paste but every class is different." Instead of teaching the curriculum the exact same way one semester to the next, teachers continually adjust lesson plans to meet the needs of each student. Teachers also focus on maintaining student interest when planning their lessons. Ms. Watkins shared, "Today, I showed a clip from a television episode because we are focusing on characters and so we also deviate from the textbook. These are 21st-Century kids. They learn more looking at an Instagram clip than they ever could from a textbook."

In addition to students immersed in content brought to life by the teacher, Ms. Marks, the Instructional Facilitator, frequently asks the teachers to reflect on their practices and consider, "Is the work that the students are doing difficult?" Non-negotiables are not necessarily passed down from administration but it is clear that the work in each and every room needed to be valuable and challenging.

Shared Instructional Decision Making

Collaboration Around Student Achievement meetings. To help support teachers prepare lessons that are engaging and meaningful, teachers attend Collaboration Around Student Achievement meetings (CASAs). Formerly called PLCs, weekly CASA meetings are run by the instructional facilitator, and focus on student assessment data and the creation of common formative assessments.

Common assessments were the driving force behind a more student-centered, data-driven approach to instruction. Although common assessments were not occurring weekly in all classrooms, CASAs were purposeful to either allow time for teachers to

create common assessments, review common assessment data to gauge student strengths and weaknesses, or ensure that the assessment was aligned well to the course standards. Ms. Marks, the Curriculum Facilitator, remarked, "We use SchoolNet for our common formative assessments—we sit together during CASA and to select the passages and questions aligned to the standard we are studying."

Formative assessment and tracking student data. At Adams High, the instructional facilitator created a student data tracker (Google Doc) for each EOC class. Teachers are responsible for adding the appropriate data to the tracking document throughout the semester.

The purpose of the data tracker is to make data easy for students to read, understand, and interpret. Autonomy is provided to each teacher to include their own common assessments, formative assessments, or summative assessments and develop the sheet as they see fit.

In-house professional development. Partnering with a media specialist, the instructional facilitator delivers professional development through lunch and learn sessions. Ms. Marks explained, "We created lunch and learn situations, so that people can come in just for a quick moment to get it. The primary focus for these sessions is supporting the use of Canvas, Google classroom, or other web 2.0 tools."

Although the district is moving toward Canvas as a learning management system, teachers comfortable with Google Classroom are still allowed to use what they have established. Teachers are taking advantage of the lunch and learn sessions because using technology as an effective form of assessment has lessened the time previously spent

correcting one hundred or more papers by hand. Ms. Marks mentioned, "When you can have all the information right away, that's what you need to be able to change what you are doing. If it takes you a week to look at 90 papers, that's overwhelming to do. The lunch and learn has been helpful."

A school-wide focus on curriculum and the ideal classroom. Three years ago, Adams High School began a process of unpacking the standards and looking closely at pacing guides and curriculum priorities in each core subject. Along with the standards being unpacked, a school-wide expectation was set regarding lesson plan design. Dr. Clapp added, "You have to do a lesson plan, you have to tell me what standard that you are working from."

To help teachers design an effective lesson plan, Adam's High adopted the gradual release of responsibility framework. This framework includes four components: me—the teacher, we—the whole group, two or few—partner work or small group work, and you—individual responsibility. The purpose of adopting the lesson plan design was to ensure opportunities for students to work as a class, a smaller group, in pairs, or on their own. This method aimed to meet the needs of a variety of student learning styles.

The instructional facilitator's ideal classroom is one in which it may be difficult to determine what is going on from an initial standpoint because there may be student conversation, student movement, and active teacher to student interaction. It is a must for students to read, write, think, and talk every day. Ms. Marks stated, "I want to see where students are able to have processing time. They can talk to a peer, share out and explain their thoughts. And that they are held accountable in some way."

In addition to relevant and engaging classroom settings, there is a focus on the standards with an understanding of how each standard is broken down as a percentage or portion of the state assessment. Teachers know their standards well enough to ensure they are stressing the most important aspects of the curriculum. Ms. Marks said, "When I am saying teach to the test, it is ethically their responsibility that they are teaching tested concepts. I talk to them about the test specs. If this is 30% to 45%, how does that play out in what we're doing in terms of our instruction?"

Adams High expects teachers to stay focused on instruction aligned to the standards and backwards in design. It is critical to know the end result and all of the parts that lead a student to mastering the entire curriculum.

Instructional Practices

Formative assessment and tracking student data. With access to technology, Ms. Watkins's English 2 students are often immersed in videos, online game-based activities, and frequent formative assessment activities. "As you can see, soon as they are done with the video they do a post-assessment. I use a lot of online game-based activities, it's important to have some type of kinesthetic, either hands-on or where they can play a game." A balance of interactive in-class activities followed by an assessment of student learning is the norm at Adams High.

In Ms. Braxton's math 1 classroom, students focus on important math vocabulary terms during the first twenty minutes of class.

> At the beginning of class, we do a bell ringer in Canvas. With vocabulary, words on one side, definitions on the other, and kids show their definitions. They guess the answer and keep going person to person. Kids love it. It gets them out of

their seat at the beginning of class, moving around and it's awesome with learning the vocabulary.

In Ms. Watkin's English 2 classroom, based on common formative assessment results, students were grouped into three different levels. "The biggest thing that I found helps children grow is grouping them based on their level of understanding, so we always take a formative assessment, and I group them." Ms. Watkins referred to the three levels as Level Up, Boost Me Up, and Help Me. The Level Up students can master most activities on their own and require little intervention or support from the teacher. The Boost Me group need some support, additional practice, or perhaps even re-teaching of certain topics, but are mostly on their own. Ms. Watkins focuses most of her energy on the Help Me group. Some of the students in this group require substantial one-on-one support. For the most part, the tasks of the Help Me group are not different from the other groups—the students just need more remediation and individual attention to gain a better understanding of the curriculum.

Through frequent formative and summative assessments, Ms. Watkin's students take ownership of their data and success or failure to master specific standards. "I make them track their progress every week. Each unit they tell me the standards they've mastered, their strengths and weaknesses, and then I make them go on USA Testprep twice a week to work on their weaknesses."

Student-centered grading practices. Adams High teachers give very little homework. If homework is assigned, it is relevant, meaningful, and often assigned at the beginning of the week providing ample time for students to manage the task. It is a

common practice to only grade homework assignments on occasion as this was an

opportunity for students to practice a skill and make mistakes.

A unique method of grading exists in Ms. Watkins English classes and she reports

that the students were brutally honest when describing the time and effort that went into

the activities and assignments.

> The three P defense method is performance, participation, and progress where
> over the course of the unit they have to essentially gather a list of artifacts that
> focus on the skills, so for this unit they have a character analysis, a theme
> analysis, a group project, and then at the end of the unit an annotated text because
> I am really big on teaching children how to annotate and then construct responses.
> They have to have so many constructed responses so at the end of the unit they sit
> down in front of a camera and they tell me what grade they feel they've earned for
> themselves from 0 to 100.

The recording of each student's testimonial is submitted through Goggle

Classroom and Ms. Watkins views the student oration of the completed assignments and

confessional of what each student thinks they deserve for a grade. A self-assessment

component, as well as an opportunity for students to express themselves in a familiar,

relevant way provides great feedback and insight into the academic progress and

personality of each student.

Taking responsibility for their learning. Building positive relationships with

students is at the core of what makes Adams High teachers successful in the academic

improvement of all from one year to the next. Ms. Braxton shared:

> I had a girl first semester that wouldn't do a darn thing—wanted to sleep every
> day. Then I heard her talking about something and I asked her to come to the
> back of the room. She's like with an attitude, "What do you want?" I told her I
> knew where she was coming from. When I was younger, my brother was older

and I always got in trouble for everything. Everything was my fault. Once I got that connection, she sat up and worked for me every day.

Teachers believe in mutual respect. Students are not being coddled or hand-held—they are expected to do their part and take responsibility for their actions and work ethic. There is consistency in the classroom, too, with routines and procedures set up well from the start of the semester. Ms. Watkins uses Google Classroom to set the stage for class daily. "Every day they know that when they go to Google Classroom it's going to give the daily agenda. I always have a unit, what they need to do, and I celebrate birthdays."

Ms. Braxton, in math I, posts her agendas in Canvas including a bell ringer that students complete at the beginning of each class. Further, she developed an interactive notebook that the students created each semester. The notebook contains assignments, guided notes, a variety of hands-on activities, manipulatives, short writing prompts, critical vocabulary terms, and more. The notebook keeps students aware of classroom expectations and important topics, as well as manages what the students missed if they were absent from class.

Having policies and procedures clearly defined helps students stay organized and aware of the expectations especially when they missed a class. Consistency in classroom routines helps students feel more at ease increasing their confidence levels and potential for success in the class.

Professional Culture

Teacher autonomy and empowerment. Adams High School does not believe in a school-wide one-size-fits-all model for their teachers. Rather, they expect teachers to thoroughly plan and deliver lesson in a meaningful and relevant manner. Taking risks with technology and Web 2.0 tools is encouraged. Further, collaborating with others teaching the same subject is paramount. Dr. Clapp summarized, "As far as growth, a lot of it goes to the teachers and how hard they push students, ask the right questions, and create an interdependent team that pushes one another in CASAs to ask and answer the critical questions."

Although the administrator or curriculum facilitator attends the CASAs, the teachers are not micromanaged with non-negotiables and mandates for their classroom. They are not asked to use a specific textbook, a certain document, or pre-determined assessment. Given choice in how lesson plans are delivered as well as how teachers incorporate formative assessment empowered them to be creative and innovative. As a result, students are engaged in the curriculum and take more ownership for their learning.

Adopting a growth mindset. Positivity is very much a part of the Adams High culture. Conversation is continually steered in the positive direction. Dr. Clapp remarked, "I like to think I help the growth mindset with my positivity and redirecting conversations that are just complaints."

The focus at Adams High is to develop people. People within departments in like subject areas, working together to think about and prepare lessons that meet the unique needs of all of the students. No matter what skill deficits or lack of prerequisite

knowledge the students have, a common belief that all students can learn is shared among faculty.

When the adults interact in a productive conversing about effective teaching practices and motivating students to reach their potential, students recognize that. A healthy adult professional culture leads to a healthy student culture. With a positive climate, students are more likely to buy in to what they are doing in the classroom and more likely to take ownership for their progress.

Summary of Adams High School

Adams High teachers positively impact students and attain high growth in the EOC subjects through differentiation of instruction and consistency in their procedures and teaching processes. Teachers differentiate by planning for different ability levels within the same classroom. Supports are provided through tiered lesson plans that are written to remediate for students that have not mastered the curriculum and enhance those that have. Students are afforded the opportunity to improve their understanding and resulting grade whether they are struggling with a standard or at or close to mastery. A classroom culture of trust and transparency exists because the students know the routines and how often they would be assessed, helping them to stay prepared and engaged in class.

Administration and curriculum support sit side by side teachers in CASAs analyzing student data and discussing ways to promote academic growth in all. Structures are in place for teachers to receive timely and purposeful feedback to improve their practices. The feedback is specific to student behaviors and teacher interactions

through delivery of the content. Honest feedback holds teachers accountable and encourages reflection of their practices.

Teachers are empowered to share what is working well in their classroom. Transparency through frequent formative assessment and the tracking of student data helps students take ownership for their learning. A healthy balance of teacher autonomy and a school-wide focus on holding all students accountable for their learning results in Adams High's success in meeting the needs of all learners.

Overview

Three parallel constructions of the findings from each of the three Piedmont Triad public high schools included observations and participant voices regarding principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture. In addition, a brief summary of the findings for each of the three schools was presented.

Merging the findings from each of the three high schools, Chapter V contains four critical themes. The four critical themes will be substantiated by the literature and further developed in the final analysis. The themes or collection of ideas from each of the three high-growth high schools will help frame instructional improvement for central office support, building leaders, and teachers in the high school academic arena.

After presenting those themes and categories that accompany them, I will address the research questions providing an interpretation to help make sense of the data. Implications and recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and educators may also

promote further inquiry and discussion regarding how high schools are achieving high academic growth in students from one year to the next.

In the end, a final collection of thoughts will provide insight into why I set out to do what I did, the findings, and what this means to those in the academic world of public high school in North Carolina.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Themes from Three Piedmont Triad Public High Schools

This research focused on principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture—topics from the literature that are associated with high-performing schools. In this chapter, four overarching themes are presented that are aligned to the literature review and based on a collection of ideas and findings that resulted from studying three high growth high schools in the Piedmont Triad region. With an eye to determining how high schools are consistently achieving high academic growth from one year to the next, strategies, activities, thinking routines, and practices were examined.

Synthesizing the findings from each of the three high schools, the four critical themes were timely and purposeful feedback, collaboration and collegiality, intentional planning, and high expectations and standards of excellence. The success of each high school rested in their ability to prioritize and excel in each of these four areas. Consequently, these themes are replicable, providing opportunity for other schools and instructional leaders to reflect on their practices and potentially make changes for the better in an effort to promote academic growth in all students.

After each of the four themes are described in detail, a summary will explain how these critical themes addressed the two research questions. In addition, a matrix will

merge the four themes with the lenses of the conceptual framework to address the research questions in an integrated, synthesized manner. The research questions are as follows:

1. How did participants perceive that principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture each play a role in achieving high growth in high schools?

2. How did principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture synthesize to influence the performance of principals, teachers, and students in high schools that achieve high growth?

Timely and Purposeful Feedback

Administrator to teacher. The principal is the overarching leader of a school serving two primary functions: to provide direction and to exercise influence (Perilla, 2014). Gone are the days of the principal maintaining the role of building manager; rather, the principal helps teachers improve their practice by supporting learning communities that promote curriculum-related conversation and collaboration in lesson plan design (Murphy, 1994).

Frequent classroom observations allow principals to see first-hand what is going on classrooms, better positioning themselves to monitor instruction, provide support to teachers, and influence the instructional climate of the school (Ing, 2009). As part of a cycle of continuous improvement, teacher walkthroughs utilize real-time classroom data that teachers identify as important for improving their practice, ultimately leading to

improved student learning. A teacher walkthrough protocol is an embedded form of professional development that uses a systematic approach that incorporates observing teacher professional growth standards, Common Core State Standards, and 21st-Century skills in the classroom (Feeney, 2014).

Aligned to the research from the field of instructional leadership, within each of the three high schools, administrative teams had established routines to informally observe teachers. Timely and specific feedback was provided focusing on the learning environment, conversation among teachers and students, and the effectiveness of instructional practices on student learning. Summarized by an assistant principal, "What activities, strategies, or thinking routines are you using that you could prove to me, if I went in your classroom and asked you, show me what Johnny was thinking about, could you show me?"

To support timely and purposeful feedback, administrators created walkthrough tools to focus instruction on course standards, frequent formative assessment, authentic student engagement, and connection to the real world. The walkthroughs were frequent and varied in length (10-15 minutes in a classroom at different times of the day and class period) to provide varied and useful data. Consequently, the data drove conversation related to formal teacher observations and could be used to address trends for the faculty at-large. Each high school developed a Google Form with the add-on feature designed to send an email copy of the walkthrough feedback directly to the teacher. Although walkthrough forms varied at each school, the form used by Lincoln Senior High School to provide purposeful feedback to teachers, generate conversation supporting high quality

teaching and learning, empower teachers to reflect on their practices, as well as discover trends (positive and negative) among teachers is located in Appendix C. This form captured each of the three high school administrative priorities related to timely and purposeful feedback.

In each high school, with a form suited for their own focus areas and teaching priorities, administrators consistently performed the walkthrough with an average of eight documented forms per teacher per year. The walkthroughs encompassed the whole building so teachers of all subject areas were receiving feedback specific to their classroom practices and student behaviors. This feedback process encouraged teacher reflection, which resulted in better lesson plan design, how well students were being assessed, and shed light on the real-world connections that students were making. Timely feedback helped develop teachers and promoted more engaging and authentic classroom experiences for students.

Teacher to student. Harrison and Killion (2007) believe the ways teachers could lead are as varied as the teachers themselves. "Teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support school and student success. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve" (Harrison & Killion, 2007, p. 74). Instructional teacher leaders perform an array of activities, including conduct professional development workshops, co-plan and model lessons, observe teaching and provide feedback, collect and analyze data, facilitate dialogue and reflective critique, and promote shared practices among peers (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010). Effective teacher leaders understand content standards such as the Common Core

and they know how to use the standards to plan instruction (Killion et al., 2012). Teacher leaders as curriculum specialists use common pacing charts and develop shared formative assessments.

Through frequent formative assessment, and the use of common assessments, teachers of like subjects in each of the three high schools were staying tightly aligned to their standards and identified student strengths and weaknesses on specific topics. Collaborating with one another talking about assessment performance student by student, standard by sub-standard supported a desire to improve each student's success within each standard of the curriculum. Collaboration around student achievement helped teachers assess whether or not each of their students were mastering the curriculum. In many cases, teachers in each of the three high schools contributed to high functioning teams and described with confidence what a student was thinking or lacking in understanding because they were holding each other accountable for student success. There was a common understanding and pride factor among the teachers that let the students know that each of their teachers cared about their learning. "These kids need support. They need a teacher who talks to them a lot, pats them on the back when they succeed—it's a lot like coaching. My classroom is one big team and it is our job to win this."

More specifically, at Lincoln High, teachers tied questions to each of their content standards and assessed their students on a daily basis. Questions were pulled from a variety of sources including, released EOC questions from the NCDPI, released questions for the New York Regents Exams, EOC preparatory materials, and SchoolNet. Student

assessments were scored in a timely fashion providing feedback to students to reflect on and analyze their progress.

At Washington High, district benchmarks in each of the three EOC tested subjects were providing quarterly feedback for teachers and students. In addition to district benchmarks, students were assessed but each department and like subject area were provided the autonomy to create their own formative assessments. Through professional learning teams, the formative assessments were created, analyzed, and drove adjustments in the teaching and learning process.

Adams High also provided district benchmarks, as well as a pre-assessment and post-assessment for each EOC subject. Similar to Washington High, the formative assessments in between the benchmark tests were teacher driven. With the help of the instructional facilitator, pre- and post-assessments, in addition to the benchmark, were written using SchoolNet as a resource. A school-wide resource to help facilitate additional student practice, USATest Prep was purchased as an online tool to support academic growth.

Summary of timely and purposeful feedback. In all, each high school provided structure along with some teacher autonomy to ensure students were assessed based on their knowledge of the course standards. The optimal resource, aligned closest to the state exam, was SchoolNet which was incorporated through common formative assessments. Through frequent formative assessment and timely feedback to students, individual needs were being met with students taking more ownership for their learning and progress in class. Each student received specific feedback (from the results of a

common formative assessment) as to whether or not they had reached a level of mastery per the course standards.

Summary of timely and purposeful feedback addressing the research questions. To address the research questions, I will discuss how principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture embody each of the themes. I will then show how these four lenses synthesize to illuminate each theme.

Synthesizing the themes with the conceptual framework lenses. Within each lens of the conceptual framework (left-hand column of Table 4), the four themes of timely and purposeful feedback, collaboration and collegiality, intentional planning, and high expectations and standards of excellence intertwined to contribute to high academic growth in all students. A visual representation of this connection is shown below in Table 4 addressing the research questions.

Principal and teacher instructional leadership. Principal and teacher instructional leadership within each of the three schools demonstrated an attitude in which all were not content with the status quo. Administrators were pushing teachers to reflect on their practices and teachers were motivating students to minimize their weaknesses through timely and purposeful feedback. Although the feedback was provided in a variety of ways, careful attention was given to maintain alignment to course standards and how each student was assessed.

Table 4

Merging the Themes with the Conceptual Framework Lenses

	Timely and Purposeful Feedback	Collaboration and Collegiality	Intentional Planning	High Expectations and Standards of Excellence
Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership	Not content with the status quo Tightly aligned to state standards and identified student strengths and weaknesses	Empowered teachers to share practices and evaluate student data results	Know your standards inside and out	No student slips through the cracks—passion to provide support and scaffolding for all students
Shared Instructional Decision-Making	Structures allow input from teachers and instructional leaders	Hold each other accountable for input and lesson plan preparation	Teach toward mastery of the standards	No matter the class, high expectations for learning are held
Instructional Practices	Students take ownership for their learning	Focus on student weaknesses and improving skills Effective use of technology to assess and provide practice	Check for understanding through frequent formative assessment Differentiate for different levels of mastery	Held accountable for producing high quality work.
Professional Culture	Hold all accountable for their learning	Collective responsibility to meet the unique needs of all students	Work must be meaningful, challenging and relevant	Healthy competitiveness and building-wide pride and purpose

The message from administrators to teachers was consistent and purposeful with feedback provided focusing on the learning environment, classroom rigor, assessment, checking for student understanding, and relevancy. In turn, teachers sent a similar message to their students through consistent data-driven feedback both formally and informally. Common assessments drove student data-tracking and monitoring their progress toward mastery of course standards.

Shared instructional decision making. With student results from frequent use of formative assessment, administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers were engaged in conversation regarding instructional decision making and what was working or not working to promote student understanding and mastery. Named differently at each school, small learning communities were evaluating student data, reflecting on their practices, and seeking ways to better meet the needs of their students. Ideas, teaching practices, and assessments were shared openly with healthy dialogue and debate about what would be best for students. All parties took ownership for the success of the school. Teachers had buy-in because they were an integral part of the decision-making process.

Instructional practices. Teaching the right content was a priority in each high school. Tightly aligned to the standards for the course, teachers were experts in their content area and extremely knowledgeable in the standards and pacing of those standards. Administration utilized a walkthrough form to identify and provide feedback regarding any issues with alignment to standards. Tasks were meaningful and challenging with relevant activities that interested students. Through timely and purposeful feedback, students were aware of their progress or lack of mastery. Teachers were transparent with

student data with systems in place to track how they were doing. Supports were also in place based on feedback as students mastered the curriculum at varying paces. Typically, there was remediation for a lower group, additional practice for a middle group, and enhancement for a higher group who already mastered the standard.

Professional culture. Accountability was important and directly contributed to the academic success of each high school. Teachers received feedback from their administration on a regular basis holding them accountable for high standards of instruction. Students were assessed frequently with the premise that not one student would be allowed to fall through the cracks. There was a relentless passion among staff to support each student in an effort to maximize their potential. No matter what starting point a student had, the opportunity to improve was a driving force behind their successful academic growth.

A synthesis of timely and purposeful feedback. Timely and purposeful feedback merged across all four lenses in an effort to promote the academic growth of all students. Through principal and teacher instructional leadership, specific feedback is provided to motivate high quality instruction in all classrooms. Administrators are using a simple feedback form to motivate teachers to reflect on their practices, check for student understanding, and ensure the classroom work is valuable. Similarly, the teachers are providing adequate feedback to students encouraging each one to take ownership for their learning. Students cannot avoid doing the work or tracking their progress because it is frequent and relevant.

Knowing that not all students learn at the same pace and come with the same prerequisite knowledge, administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers met regularly to analyze student data, discuss different teaching strategies, and support each other in creating effective formative assessments. The shared responsibility for student learning gathered buy-in from all in the PLC, PLT, or CASA team. Healthy discussion from walkthrough trends and feedback from student assessment data work together to promote meaningful lesson plans. With a focus on mastery of standards and individual student success, meaningful activities within the classroom are motivating students in a more personalized, relatable way. A blend of access to technology to improve skills through interactive websites or other online resources are engaging students.

Every student receives feedback which sends a positive message to the student. Each student is a priority and caring about their academic progress is a priority. Again, no one slips through the cracks and high expectations are held for all students. Turning a weakness into a strength through timely and purposeful feedback is encouraging students to take ownership for their learning and become a healthy and active participant in the school.

Collaboration and Collegiality

Teachers working together. Passionate, devoted, and empathetic people were driving the successful academic growth of students in each of the three high schools. There was no specific program or initiative mandated by building leaders. People within administration, curriculum support, and various departments were working together to

build positive relationships, improve instructional practices, and develop built-in barometers to meet the unique needs all students.

A shared leadership model of governance means principals seek out others in their school to build partnerships, tap others' strengths, and jointly move the vision forward (Burgess & Bates, 2009). Research continues to focus on the leader's role in alignment with effective outcomes, but principals are not able to influence such change alone (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Continued emphasis is placed on developing structures for sharing leadership and allowing others to be part of the decision-making process. The critical work of schools is done through relationships among people. Those relationships need to be nurtured and attended to so that conversations move beyond collegiality to collaboration and a commitment to improving one's craft (Quint, 2008).

Within each of the three high schools, collaboration among teachers focusing on student learning was apparent. Teachers were meeting at least once a week to plan, discuss, and analyze student data in the form of PLCs, PLTs, or CASAs. Although each had a different name, all focused on improving classroom practices to best meet the unique needs of all learners. Not only was each collaborative group meeting regularly to analyzing student data, groups were manipulating the data to ensure the student results were readable and understandable. To help maintain accountability for each PLC and its members, google forms were used in each high school to focus the team, track their progress over time, and document what was working well or needed adjusting as it related to each of the course standards. Appendix D depicts a google form that

summarizes how each team maintains an authentic, high functioning PLC, PLT, or CASA.

Within each of the three high schools, the collaborative meetings were empowering teachers to share their wealth of knowledge and constantly evaluate their practices. "We get so excited about our content, we geek out on this stuff. The whole department gravitates to one room—it's a collective effort and intentional planning, the refusal to let any student slip." Student data were readily available through frequent formative assessment. As a result, teachers knew what part or parts of the curriculum students were in need of additional support. By meeting frequently and documenting both the good and the bad, working relationships within each building were healthy and positive.

Relevant and subject-specific staff development. Changes in demographics were occurring in each of the three high schools, with more diversity impacting practices and decisions among the staff. To meet the needs of a culturally diverse student body, training around cultural competence was a professional development priority particularly focusing on increased numbers of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Academic achievement for all students was a daunting task but each of the three high schools were achieving this mark as a result of first getting to know the students taking into consideration their background and how best they learn. There was no district or school mandated strategy, document, or assessment that was pushed down to teachers. Rather, collaboration was existing through staff development that was catered to departmental needs. "Sophisticated forms of teaching are needed to develop student

competencies such as deep mastery of challenging content, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction. In turn, effective professional development is needed to help teachers learn and refine the pedagogies required to teach these skills" (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017, p. v). Staff development was content specific not a cookie cutter approach where each teacher, no matter the subject, received the same training or same message. Contrary to a one-size-fits-all model, staff development led by curriculum facilitators, assistant principals, or the principal allowed for content specific training that modeled the same growth mindset critical to the academic success of students in that all staff would learn and further develop their ability to motivate and inspire students to reach their maximum potential.

In addition, professional development within each high school was consistent throughout the year encouraging teachers to improve their craft in one area rather than through multiple initiatives. In this manner, teachers were able stick to one focus area throughout the school year impacting their own practices and positively influence their students. For example, Lincoln Senior High focused on differentiation of instruction for students of varying ability levels. Monthly professional development sessions challenged teachers to take their formative assessment data and adjust or adapt their instructional methods to meet all of the differing needs of the students. Curricula were written under the assumption that students were entering the class prepared to handle the level of rigor that the course required. Lincoln Senior High realized that not all of their students mastered the prior standards so rich discussion within like subject areas talked frequently

about how to meet the academic, psychological, social, and behavioral needs of each student.

At Adams High, ongoing professional development was centered on the development and implementation of common formative assessments to track student progress and respond to their specific learning needs. Similar to Lincoln Senior High, a school-wide initiative was structured for individual departments to discuss and develop common assessments aligned to their standards. Teachers were already meeting as critical friends in a collaborative share session. Conversation was now centered on how engaging and authentic each other's classrooms were. The common formative assessments gauged student understanding tracking each student's progress on their mastery of the standards. Questions would have to be carefully aligned to each standard with a premise that students should not be assessed through a majority of fact-based, recall type questions. Instead, common assessments required students to think deeply, analyze, evaluate, or make connections. Collaborative sessions with curriculum support personnel and administration steered teachers away from basic remembering and understanding assessment techniques pushing teachers to consistently challenge their students.

Taking an even more specific approach to in-house staff development, Washington High used teacher-leaders as well as instructional facilitators to narrow in on how to incorporate effective literacy strategies in all classrooms across all disciplines. Most importantly, as was the case in each of the previous two high school staff development sessions, all teachers were immersed in the school-wide focus. There was

not a train-the-trainer model in which only select teachers took part in the professional

development to then pass along to their colleagues. Rather, all teachers, from cultural

arts to physical education were required to incorporate the literacy strategies in their

classroom on a consistent basis. Teachers received training on how students should be

reading grade-level text individually, how students should manage and organize

information, and ways to discuss the acquired knowledge in small and large group

settings. Strategies also included effective ways for students to record their thoughts or

present information through a well-thought out organized written expression.

Developing a common language and agreed upon expectations in every classroom, across

all subjects, helped foster consistency and empowerment of teachers as they shared in the

responsibility of supporting improvement in reading and writing in all classrooms.

Sticking with one initiative had paid off in the area of academic growth for each

of the three high schools as significant academic gains have taken place each of the past

two years. Having consistency in both expectations and a staff development purpose

resulted in improved results for all students. By providing all teachers input and a level

of control over their work, they bought in to the staff development initiative and

consequently worked harder to achieve the agreed upon goals. A mistake of many school

leaders or curriculum support personnel is to only include a small number of their best

teachers in the decision-making process and staff development needs. This problem

often permeated to PLCs with experienced teachers controlling the process. In each of

the three studied high schools, to create a school culture that expects and supports high

academic growth, staff development was structured to support individual teacher needs with everyone valued and involved in the process.

Every voice was heard. Shared decision making helped build trust among staff and empowered all participants to work toward a common goal. While shared decision making did not necessitate agreement and complete consensus, it did promote consistency and buy in among staff. "When teachers have a voice in decision-making, they are four times more likely to believe they can make a difference. They are also three times more likely to encourage students to be leaders and to make decisions" (Quaglia & Lande, 2016, p. 2).

One important area contributing to the success of each of the three high schools was academic advisement and the process of registering and scheduling students. Given the size of each high school and the complexity of the matrix of course offerings, a shared approach to the placement of students was driving the registration process. Teachers were having critical conversations with students about fit, challenging oneself, and what would be the best learning situation for each of them. Counselors were meeting one-on-one with students with teacher feedback suggesting course options and levels for each student. Administration was meeting with the counselors regularly discussing course offerings, scheduling concerns or conflicts, and student placement to best meet the needs and priorities of all students. Student data was used to help evaluate the most appropriate and challenging class for each student to ensure students would stretch their learning and maximize their potential from one year to the next. Working in isolation was not the norm. Teachers provided valuable input for each student through a Google

doc or shared Google sheet, for example. Counselors and administrators worked to place students in courses that were appropriate and balanced. With a variety of stakeholders contributing to the advisement process, students were less likely to fall through the cracks or have an uninspired, negative classroom experience.

High functioning, collaborative school improvement teams. It is often easier to micromanage teachers and do damage control when necessary rather than invest in good communication, team building, and empowerment of staff. Each of the three high schools were practicing more of a shared vision, collaboration, and empowerment of all through the diligent and authentic work of a team of leaders. Each school improvement team had a focus on maximizing student potential to develop each and every student no matter what their starting point was. Including multiple perspectives in the decision-making process involved a variety of staff to best move the school in a positive direction. Involving teachers, support staff, curriculum facilitators, etc. in decisions that affected the school was positively received and supported by the teachers. There were no hidden agendas or secret messages. Teams were transparent and kept informed along the way. School improvement teams had a desire to brainstorm ways to continually improve. Conversation often led to ways in which teachers could take more risks and try new things for the betterment of the school. Innovation and thinking outside of the box were encouraged in all three sites.

A common theme that emerged from each of the school improvement teams planning process was to provide all teachers opportunities for their own personal development beyond school. Cookie cutter staff development where everybody walked

in the same door to hear the same message was never an option. Time for teachers to

improve their craft was valued and appreciated. Each team at each high school worked to

preserve time, allowing for collaboration to design effective lessons, create common

assessments, and participate in workshops or clinics given it was a worthwhile

opportunity.

 Summary of collaboration and collegiality addressing the research questions.

In each high school, a collective responsibility to teach all students was prevalent.

Participation in collaborative meetings was inherently a part of the school culture.

Meetings were not forced or mandated. Discussing student successes and failures,

reflecting on teaching practices, or creating formative assessments, teams of teachers

were functioning with the best interests of students in mind.

 Principal and teacher instructional leadership. Through the lens of principal

and teacher instructional leadership, collaboration and collegiality was about positive

relationships and working together to promote the optimal learning environment for each

student. Teachers were given the autonomy to create lessons that would inspire,

motivate, and engage all students. Mandates were not pushed down from administration.

In addition, staff development was catered to the needs of the school. There was not a

one-size-fits-all model forcing teachers to partake in a mundane, useless staff

development session. In contrast, schools allowed for content specific training or training

centered on a school improvement goal.

 Shared instructional decision making. Teachers held themselves accountable by

tracking their own PLC/PLT/CASA progress and sharing ideas and effective teaching

strategies for the betterment of all. A joint effort to properly place students in the best academic scenarios existed in each of the three high schools. Administration worked with counselors and teachers to best meet the needs of each student. Thoughtful placement of students was driven by a team of personnel who each had valuable input on what was in the best interest of each student.

Instructional practices. Lifelong learning was also evident in each building. Teachers sought ways to grow professionally and administration did not waste valuable time with mandated purposeless professional development. Staff development needs were building focused and teacher-centered.

Based on feedback and frequent use of formative assessment, teachers adjusted their plans to differentiate instruction to best meet the needs of each student. Gone are the days of teaching to the middle. In each school, methods to check for student understanding separated students into three tiered groups. With the help of their colleagues, lesson plan ideas were shared and interactive websites were used to ease the burden of three unique lesson plans. Students were provided instruction based on their knowledge of the curriculum. Opportunities to practice and turn weaknesses into strengths were woven into to lesson plans. Students were provided a chance to improve their grade, as well. With an effort to promote mastery learning, retests or re-quizzes were given to help the student gain mastery of a standard or show improvement within a standard. This commitment and passion to differentiate for three learning groups and re-assess develops a growth mindset in the students.

Professional culture. Every student mattered and was supported to reach their highest potential. Students had multiple opportunities to learn and achieve success because learning was strongly influenced by their connectedness to the teacher. Students progressed through the material at different speeds but all were held to a high standard to determine what worked best for each of them. Each school's staff was adept at creating a school and classroom culture that facilitated personal pride and purpose in all that they did.

A synthesis of collaboration and collegiality. The academic success in the area of student growth at each high school was in large part due to the working relationships of the teachers. PLCs/PLTs/CASAs were high functioning because time was spent wisely developing formative assessments, common assessments, or tweaking lesson plans due to student outcomes and progress. Teachers were willing to grow professionally through active participation in staff development opportunities and felt empowered with a voice in decision making related to what was in the best interest of the student.

Administrators were accessible and very much a part of collaborative meetings. Helping drive the conversation, administrators maintained accountability in staff demanding high quality instruction that catered to the individual needs of the student. Open and frank discussion and dialogue were occurring as a result of solid working relationships.

With positive relationships, staff became more competitive hoping to outdo other schools in the district. The healthy competition raised the level of expectations for both teachers and students even helping motivate some to try harder.

Intentional Planning

Both common sense and research tells us that an engaged student at any grade

level will invest, and therefore achieve more than a disengaged student (Hattie, 2012;

Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Walkington, 2013). Consensus among teachers in all three

schools was that when a student walked into a classroom, he or she felt welcomed. The

student felt like they were a part of something. They knew the expectations. They would

be held accountable for their learning through meaningful work and how they interact

with the teacher as well as their classmates. A Washington High teacher noted, "That

they know they have high expectations placed on them and that they will be held

accountable and responsible if they are not meeting those expectations. It is impossible

to skate by."

To be successful in getting to know the student first, engaging the student in the

curriculum required a meaningful, thought-out lesson plan. Whether it occurred over the

summer or during the school year, teachers in the core subject areas of English, math,

social studies, and science were required to unpack their standards and gain an

understanding for exactly what was to be taught. Knowing the standards inside and out

was critical to maintain alignment with what the students would be assessed on through

the end of course exam. Of note, each individual teacher spent a great deal of time

unpacking and exploring the standards and sub-standards for their discipline. It was not a

teach-the-teacher model in which a lead teacher in each subject area unpacked the

standards and brought the experience and information back to the school to share within

their PLC. Instead, each individual member of the PLC/PLT/CASA was immersed in the

unpacking of the standards, the mapping of the curriculum, and ensured alignment and proper pacing throughout the process.

Students manipulating the content. Read, write, talk, and think every day. This was ingrained in classrooms of each high school. Appropriate noise levels, student movement, and student social interaction were holding students accountable for their learning. Dynamic teachers were leading classrooms with high expectations for all students. Routines were established, expectations were clear, and students were taking ownership for their progress and mastery of the content. While teaching the concepts and skills, the teacher must help students draw on their own experiences to build a scaffold on which they can hang new ideas. When students are actively engaged, they focus on what is being taught and better process new information (Lorain, 2015). A variety of activities, strategies, thinking routines, and teaching tools enabled students to fully immerse themselves in the curriculum manipulating the content on a daily basis. For example, techniques shared by teachers or instructional facilitators from each of the three high schools included:

- *See/Think/Wonder* asks the students, what do you see? What do you think about the topic? What does it make you wonder? This thinking routine was often used to introduce a lesson or unit of study. It encouraged students to observe closely and make interpretations which led them into inquiry about the topic;

- *Think/Puzzle/Explore* asked the students, what do you know about the topic? What questions or puzzles do you have? What does the topic want you to

explore? Similar to the first thinking routine, this method provided great

information for teachers to help guide future instruction if students wrote

down the questions or puzzles that they had;

- *Chalk Talk* allowed students to show their thinking while moving around the

    room. What comes to mind when considering the idea, question, or problem?

    What connections can be made about the ideas and consider the responses and

    comments of others. This routine let students build on the responses of others

    as they circulated around the room. Often, teachers then used the student

    responses to lead a class discussion;

- *Headline Routine* helped students summarize and draw conclusions. Students

    were asked to write a headline for the topic or issue that captured the most

    important aspect that should be remembered. Students were asked to reflect

    on how a headline may change based on class discussion or input from

    classmates. This routine often culminated a unit of study or major discussion

    with students showing their understanding of main ideas and the importance

    of new information they had learned;

- *The 4 C's* was used to help structure a discussion around a piece of text.

    Connections—what connections do you draw between the text and your own

    life or learned experiences? *Challenge*—what ideas, positions, or

    assumptions do you want to challenge or argue within the text? *Concepts*—

    what key concepts or ideas do you think were important and worth holding on

    to from the text? And *Changes*—what changes in attitudes, thinking, or

action were suggested by the text, either for you the student or others? The 4

C's could be listed as four different boxes on a handout so that students could

write down their responses and add to or change their mind as they work

through the text;

- *Think/Pair/Share* gave students a prompt that they thought about and

   responded to. Chromebooks were used to allow simple sharing through a

   google doc with the teacher or a classmate. Students were then required to

   respond to another student exposing them to different points of view and

   thought processes. Ultimately, ideas and conversations were shared out with

   the class;

- *Thinking Maps* were consistent visual patterns linked directly to eight specific

   thought processes. By visualizing thinking, students created concrete images

   of abstract thoughts. These patterns helped all students reach higher levels of

   critical and creative thinking—essential components of 21st-Century

   education;

- *Socratic Seminar* allowed students to help one another understand ideas,

   issues, and values reflected in a text through a group discussion format.

   Students were responsible for facilitating their group discussion around the

   ideas in the text. They were not supposed to use the discussion to assert their

   opinions or prove an argument. Rather, through this type of discussion,

   students practiced how to listen to one another, make meaning, and build

   consensus while participating in a larger conversation.

Although this only highlights a few of the activities and strategies, the thinking routines proved a relentless passion and desire of the teachers to challenge students while providing some excitement about learning. Students became more interested in the subject matter. Teachers invested in each and every student through thought-provoking, relevant, meaningful, and reflective activities.

Teaching toward mastery. Teachers at each of the three high schools were constantly looking at individual student data evaluating what was mastered and what needed more attention. Students learned from their mistakes so the focus was placed on what they missed. As Ms. Watkins, Adams High English teacher said, "That's where the growth comes from because they are doing the assessment, they are reviewing the results, and they are going to retest." Frequent formative assessments with questions tied to standards or sub-standards provided specific evidence of how well the students grasped the curriculum, checking for their understanding. Within the EOC subjects, each student was aware of the content standard and whether or not they have reached mastery of that standard. Although it did not look the same at each school, students had the opportunity to improve their mastery of a standard through retesting. For example, in a math 1 class, students were required to spend time before or after school with a teacher prior to a retest. In a biology class, students were given an opportunity to retest no matter what their score was. And, in an English 2 class, students that did not meet 80% proficiency were required to retest after some intense practice.

In each case, the retest questions were different than the original assessment but support was provided to help the students improve. One school established a "Dead

Period" to focus efforts on remediation, regrouping, and review. Another school offered "Throwback Thursdays" to allow students to concentrate on their weaknesses and review standards that were not yet mastered. A third school spiraled the questions most students did poorly on by incorporating similar questions into the class opener or warm-up activity. With the retake opportunities, almost all of the students were excited to see gains in their level of understating and improved grade. Teachers also felt that their students were taking more ownership for their learning because the teachers were not giving up on the students.

To help maintain transparency and allow students to take ownership for their data, student data trackers were used (see Appendix E). The two examples consisted of an EOC Goal Tracker for English 2 and a second snapshot of an Assessment/Re-Assessment Student Tracker for biology. Each was critical to the data collection process of frequent formative assessment and students taking ownership for their progress and mastery of the curriculum.

Evaluating student data, with students tracking their progress throughout the semester, allowed for differentiation of instruction. The teacher as well as the student was able to easily recognize how well each standard or substandard was mastered. Ability level grouping, more individualized attention, or whole group discussion resulted based on the data. Further, classroom instruction was based on the specific needs of the students and not necessarily catered to the class as a whole. This individualized approach to instruction helped students focus on their specific areas of weakness or the skills in

which they needed additional support. The data trackers were tightly aligned to the state standards and maintained organization and clarity for each of the students.

Differentiation of instruction through the effective use of technology. Not every student learned at the same pace. Some required more practice on a certain skill or activity. "Evidence is mounting to support technology advocates' claims that 21st-Century information and communication tools as well as more traditional computer-assisted instructional applications can positively influence student learning processes and outcomes" (Cradler, McNabb, Freeman, & Burchett, 2002, p. 47). Although Adams High was the only school with a one-to-one laptop to student ratio, both Lincoln High and Washington High had Chromebook carts accessible to teachers. Technology promoted student academic growth in all three schools through timely and efficient feedback. The use of technology tools or interactive programs such as Kahoot!, Quizlet, Quizizz, USA TestPrep, SchoolNet, Castle Learning, Delta Math, IXL for Math or English, ZipGrade, among others provided a means for students to focus on their weaknesses or encouraged enrichment. Through frequent formative assessment, teachers were able to cater to student needs and spend adequate time with student in need more support. The technology allowed students to practice, working toward mastery of a topic or standard. Rather than developing three or more separate lesson plan activities by hand, interactive websites and computer-based programs accessible on a laptop personalized instruction for each student. This freed up the teacher to help those in greatest need of assistance. Students watched a video, immersed themselves in a game-based competitive

online activity, or just practiced additional problems based on their current level of understanding.

Essentially, differentiation of instruction was occurring with students subscribing to the program and quantity of practice to best meets their needs. Some students required more re-teaching than others, while some just needed to turn a minor weakness into a strength. With the student engaged in an interactive game or web-based assessment, the teacher easily facilitated learning based on the needs and progress of each student. At no point was technology taking the place of a textbook for mundane use by the student. Instead, the device supported an interactive experience for the student catering to their mastery of the content. Timely feedback and useful information from a website or technology tool helped the teacher establish which students needed the most support.

Providing additional methods to assess or check for student understanding, laptops were also used in a variety of English classes among each of the three high schools to record personal reflective summaries of student understanding. Sitting down in front of the laptop camera, students recorded a reflective summary of how well they knew the curriculum for that particular unit. Some teachers provided a prompt or questions to motivate the student to capture the project, performance assessment, scavenger hunt activity, online practice outcomes, or even their important pieces in the unit of study. Several teachers also required that students ended their dialogue with a justification for their grade earned. Students may have had to discuss a group results on quizzes or tests, justifying their understanding of the curriculum. Once again, students were taking ownership for their learning in a manner that was personal and unique to who

they were as a person and student. Dialogues were posted in either Canvas or Google

Classroom for the teacher's viewing pleasure and assessment needs.

Summary of intentional planning addressing the research questions.

Tremendous responsibility rested with the classroom teacher as it related to the successful

academic growth of every student. A Washington High teacher describes her experience,

> There is so much autonomy given to teachers. We don't have to use the same
> program to determine whether or not students are growing. We don't have to
> plug them into the same bank. We have overall common goals but then we're
> allowed the individual freedom to decide how we are going to get to that goal for
> our subject area.

Preparation of relevant, meaningful, challenging, and engaging lessons was

critical to grow professionally and personally as a teacher which in turn inspired students

to work harder to better themselves as students.

Principal and teacher instructional leadership. A common lesson plan design or

framework was used in each of the three high schools. Teachers successfully meeting the

unique needs of all students leading to significant gains in student performance all

adopted a backwards design model. Each teacher knew their content standards well and

had unpacked their course standards within the past two or three years. In all three high

schools, the standards informed and shaped the teachers work. The standards identified

the important ideas and topics that students would focus on, determined how they would

collect assessment evidence to monitor and track student progress, and determined how

best the curriculum should be taught to reach each and every student. It was apparent

that putting in the proper planning time resulted in positive outcomes for students.

Shared instructional decision making. Teachers were not meeting for the sake of meeting or to fulfill a requirement set by administration. They were gathering to talk about student data, reflect on what classroom practices were best reaching the students, and develop meaningful ways to check for student understanding. Teachers held each other accountable for student learning and academic growth. It was a cooperative approach to high quality teaching and learning not a competition to see who would outdo who.

Instructional practices. Classrooms were student-centered with relevant and meaningful activities taking place on a daily basis. Relentless planners, teachers were developing lessons based on course standards and student interests. There was relevancy in the classroom and social interaction resulted through discussion and debate. Students learned from each other and learned about themselves.

Technology was also incorporated to enhance the curriculum not to replace a textbook. Frequent formative assessment was often in an online format to better track the results. It was recognized in each of the high schools that students learn at different paces. Having the opportunity to work on a weakness through remediation or additional practice showed how much each student's academic progress was cared for.

Professional culture. Administration embraced a healthy balance of the art of teaching and the science of teaching. Teachers were held accountable for the preparation and execution of relevant and meaningful lesson plans tightly aligned to the content standards. Gaining trust and building positive relationships with teachers was a priority before getting down to specific feedback related to classroom practices.

A synthesis of intentional planning. Passionate and dedicated administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers all contributed to the positive academic growth of students. Administrators are supportive yet demanding with high standards for classroom instruction. The work needs to be valuable and teachers are expected to know their standards.

It is a collective effort to meet the unique needs of all students. No one is working in isolation. Staff are visible and accessible with a desire to help students develop as students and people. Administration provides consistent feedback to teachers. Teachers provide consistent feedback to students. This routine activity and consistent structure helps students stay organized and comfortable in their classroom. Multiple initiatives are not blurring the focus of teaching and learning. Rather, the classroom focus is on mastery of the standards, with every student welcomed, embraced, and supported to have a positive learning experience. As is the case in each high school, through frequent formative assessment and the tracking of student data, students are showing academic growth from year to year. Lesson plans are written to meet the needs of the students, not in the interest of what the teacher enjoys teaching. A concerted effort is made to interest the students and provide opportunity for students to manipulate the content. Classrooms are active and social versus passive and boring. The standard is set high from the administrators to the teachers and this attitude carries over into the classroom. When the students realize how much time, effort, and care the teacher is placing in them, they often buy in to doing their best to reach their highest potential.

High Expectations and Standards of Excellence

According to Deal and Peterson (2009), research suggests that a strong, positive culture serves beneficial functions, including the following: fosters effort and productivity; improves collegial and collaborative activities that in turn promote better communication and problem solving; supports successful change and improvement efforts; builds commitment and helps students and teachers identify with the school; amplifies energy and motivation of staff members and students; and focuses attention and daily behavior on what was important and valued. Undoubtedly, school culture is an important part of the work that educators need to do if students are going to achieve at high levels. An effective school culture "will provide students a respectful mediating experience through which they can understand, examine, affirm, modify, or change understandings of the world and how they want to engage in it" (Fisher et al., 2012, p. 9).

At Lincoln Senior High, Washington High, and Adams High, there was a fundamental approach to classroom instruction that focused on rigor and clear expectations. To keep students on track and organized, classrooms were regimented and structured with clear and intentional expectations. Whether it was through Google Classroom or a Learning Management System such as Canvas, lesson plan agendas or outlines were evident to students, learning targets or essential questions focused on the standard or standards in a unit, and the activities, classroom tasks, and assessments were meaningful.

Students having knowledge of the subject matter was not necessarily going to translate to an A average. Hard work would be required of all students. Not one student

would be allowed to slip through the cracks because they would be held accountable for their learning through frequent formative assessment, tracking their own data. Classroom supports were put in place to ensure their success through remediation, re-teaching, and retesting strategies. Planning for different level classes looked very much the same. There was a common theme that teachers were teaching students to love to learn whether they were in an honors class or standard level class. The teachers were not separating the honors students from the standard students in their preparation of tasks. All students were expected to think critically and read thoroughly—it was the structure and scaffolding to those that needed additional support that was critical. No matter the class level, students that were proficient were being asked to extend their knowledge, students that needed some reinforcement were provided opportunities for remediation and extra practice, and those that were missing larger chunks of the curriculum received more one-on-one focused attention.

  Positive shout-outs. Enthusiasm was contagious. If a teacher was enthusiastic about their role and how he or she delivered the curriculum, then the students joined in and their enthusiasm, interest, and joy for learning increased. Creating a classroom atmosphere where the students felt supported by both the teacher and other classmates was the best-case scenario for academic success and growth. Being competitive as a teacher was positive in many ways as the students knew the teacher was in it to win it with all of the students in an effort to work as hard as they could to teach the curriculum, make each student better, and never give up on any individual. To inspire students, each of the high schools recognized students to spread a positive message and put on public

display the good things that were happening in the building. Examples included shout-

outs on the school website, or a weekly ledger of good news with pictures and blurbs

describing an inspiring moment or dynamic classroom activity. School Facebook pages,

Twitter feeds, and Instagram accounts were also filled with positives building both

teacher and student morale. A sense of pride and accomplishment resulted not only

among students but the teachers as well. Students and staff wanted to be a part of that

success and being recognized among one's peers helped motivate both students and

teachers to go above and beyond. Getting excited about learning, promoting school

pride, and becoming part of a greater good was resulting in positive classroom

experiences for all.

Great schools contain great people. Working in isolation was not the norm in

any of the three high schools. Building leaders took great pride in surrounding

themselves with the best and brightest people that they could find who had a passion for

educating all students from all walks of life. Hiring teachers willing to accept challenges,

take risks, and work together as part of a team was paramount. Each school used a

committee of administrators, curriculum support and teachers to interview candidates

using a variety of agreed upon prompts. Open discussions about how a candidate would

add to the professional culture of the school was part of the process in each school. Each

school searched for self-motivated, thoughtful, and cooperative people who had high

expectations for themselves and their students. Hiring a reflective practitioner who was

willing to invest in developing positive working relationships helped create a family

atmosphere where students were not only supported by the teacher but also by their classmates.

Rigor and relevance in all subjects. In existence at all three high schools, teachers regardless of what they taught had high expectations for their students. Students were shared throughout a high school and every teacher did their best to impact their students in a relevant and meaningful way. Each of the high schools had an ingrained sense of competitiveness with its rival in-county high schools and every teacher, regardless of subject area, worked together as a team to empower students to continually improve. Lesson plans in a world language class or cultural arts class equally challenged students to think deeply and creatively stretching their learning. Whether a student was in an elective class or a core class, they knew that they were responsible for their learning and would be held to a certain standard of excellence.

A healthy sense of building-wide pride fueled students to want to do well. This ubiquitous paradigm of a culture of high expectations for all students was common in each of the three high schools. Whether a student was entering into a social studies class, a CTE class, a world language class, or an English class, they knew that they were going to be pushing themselves because they would held be accountable for their learning and responsible to meet those teacher's expectations. Not every student excelled in each of their core subject areas. Perhaps an elective class allowed a student to shine or connected them to school in a positive way giving them reason to try harder or improve their performance in a core area. Having teachers with high standards willing to invest in all students across all disciplines developed a caring and collaborative school community.

Summary of high expectations and standards of excellence addressing the research questions. In each of the three high schools, the community had an expectation that their children would be challenged and supported with opportunities to reach their highest potential to be best prepared for life after high school. Whether the student was in honors classes or standard classes, Advanced Placement classes, or a combination of both, there was a desire for their child to be taught a love for learning. Ms. Parks, a math 1 teacher shared, "My expectations for my kids are the same no matter what they come into my class knowing or not knowing." Principals recognized and accepted the challenge of the parents and provided the structure and resources for each of their staffs. Instruction was the focus, with little time spent in meetings or professional development that did not support best practices.

Principal and teacher instructional leadership. In a similar fashion, principals held their teachers to a high standard asking them to be very intentional in their planning while frequently checking for student understanding to adequately support the needs of each and every child. No matter the classroom, no matter the department, students knew that they were going to be asked to perform to the best of their ability day in and day out. Students in each school could not just fall back on their natural ability—they were held accountable for producing quality work. Further, each student was required to work hard because reading and writing was hard work and school leaders and classroom teachers continually challenged themselves with two questions: How are we getting better? And, what can we do to make it better?

Shared instructional decision making. Free from being micromanaged, the content experts were passionate, prepared, and student-centered in their approach. Every student was provided the same opportunity to learn and re-learn. Some took longer than others or required more support along the way. Regardless, the appropriate scaffolding, extra help, and support was provided to turn weaknesses into strengths. With the extra help sessions and opportunities to retake assessments, students saw that the teacher was not giving up on them which led them to take more ownership for their learning. In most cases, comparison data within the teacher's classrooms across all three schools was almost always showing student growth in the right direction. Parents were trusting schools to invest in their children. Principals were empowering teachers to inspire each and every student. Teachers were challenging students through relevant and meaningful lesson plans. People and departments within a high school were working together to build positive relationships with students and hold each student accountable for becoming the best student that they could be.

Instructional practices. Strong voices from a variety of teachers existed in the schools. Teachers in each high school had control over their classroom, input in how they ran it, and provided the support teach the best way they knew how. Classroom practices got outside of the traditional textbook. Students were using their hands, manipulating the content or moving around the room solving problems scattered on the walls. Labs and technology immersed students in interactive activities. Competitions and games held students' attention. In all, teachers developed lessons to meet a variety of learners from a variety of backgrounds. Regardless of gaps in understanding or lack of

prerequisite knowledge, teachers were passionate to support the individual needs of all. This required great time and energy in preparation of lessons. Across all of the high schools, this was not an issue for any of the teachers. There was a passion desire to support their students as if they were their own.

Professional culture. Every student mattered and every effort would be made to motivate all students to engage in the curriculum. Some worked harder than others and some were more stubborn than others but there was a relentless effort to help all students learn. No one was dismissed in the classroom setting. Administrators did their best to support students yet maintain high expectations for their behavior and academic effort. Making personal connections with the students was important to the academic success of many students. Teachers forged positive relationships with students by getting to know their strengths, weaknesses, a bit of their personality.

A synthesis for high expectations and standards of excellence. In each high school, teachers had a positive outlook, enjoyed their role, and worked closely with one another to build a strong sense of community. With a community building leaders and teachers willing to work together and share ideas, student academic growth results were flourishing. There was a pride and purpose within each school that you wanted to be a part of. Students wanted to connect to that something special which promoted positive learning conditions for all. Students were supported and asked to take risks with high expectations held for each and every student no matter their starting point. A combination of trust, positive relationships, student-centered focus, and high standards drove staff to work together to build capacity. From the administration to the teachers to

the students, all were devoting time and energy to keep getting better and meet the unique needs of their students.

Addressing Research Question 1

According to Kouzes and Posner (2016), "Leadership is about shared vision and values. It's about getting everyone aligned with a common purpose, common cause" (p. 88). Under the frame principal and teacher instructional leadership, teachers are required to know their standards, meet the needs of all learners, and provide the necessary scaffolding for all students to maximize their potential. Principals and instructional facilitators are working side-by-side teachers to share what is working and what needs adjusting through walkthrough feedback and PLC/PLT/CASA conversations. As Ms. Marks, the instructional facilitator at Adams High stated, "We have to think about what we are doing and why we are doing it. I am in the building, in their classrooms, and go to all the CASA meetings." All stakeholders work with a purpose and passion to support every child no matter what their starting point may be. Settling for the status quo is not an option for administrators, instructional facilitators, teachers, and students. Lesson plans reflect meaningful, relevant, and challenging activities that engage all students.

Within shared instructional decision making, high expectations for learning are a priority in every class, for every student. Within each high school, collaborative meetings allow for input and conversation centered on the teaching and learning process. Teachers are forthright with ideas and lesson plans that work. Assessment tools are developed and shared. Administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers hold each other accountable for high quality work. As Mr. Perkins, the Instructional Program

Specialist at Lincoln Senior High told his teachers, "What activities, strategies, or thinking routines are you using that you could prove to me if I went in there and asked you to show me what Johnny was thinking." There is a pride and purpose to meeting the unique needs of all students with decisions made in the interest of academic improvement.

In the instructional practices frame, students are immersed in the curriculum through relevant and meaningful activities. Lesson plans are purposeful and tightly aligned to course standards. Teachers are masterful at checking for student understanding through frequent formative assessment. Ms. Watkins, Adams High English teacher remarked, "We are constantly assessing. And the next biggest thing that I found that helps children grow is grouping them based on their level of learning, so we always take a formative assessment." Teachers know their students' strengths and weaknesses and plan accordingly to differentiate for their specific needs. Working toward mastery of standards promotes a growth mindset in students improving their knowledge of the content through hard work and practice. Research supports that an engaged student will invest in their education and take ownership for their learning through self-assessment (Wiggins, 2013). Teachers across all three schools created work that was valuable and at the appropriate ability level for each student depending on their level of understanding. It was not a one-size-fits-all method of curriculum delivery; rather, students worked toward mastery and practiced weaker skills and concepts to raise their level of understanding.

Under the professional culture frame, all students are held accountable for producing high quality work. There is a collective responsibility to challenge all students with appropriate tasks. According to Hallinger (2011), shared learning and decision making in schools are often linked to an enhanced professional culture. A building-wide pride fueled teachers to connect all students through a nurturing yet valuable classroom experience. Classrooms across all three high schools focused on rigor and high expectations for each student. Summarized well by Mr. Stern, Washington High English teacher, "They know that if they are walking into a social studies class, an arts class, a CTE class, an English class, or a foreign language class, whatever the department is, that they know they are going to be pushing themselves." There was a healthy sense that students knew they had high expectations placed on them and would be held accountable and responsible if they did not meet those expectations. Again, no one would skate by without getting the support and attention that they needed. A rule to live by at Lincoln Senior High was mentioned several times, "High expectations combined with support. Students have to be held accountable for producing high quality work." This sentiment was serious and accepted as a collective responsibility of all staff. The commitment and passion to promote high standards of excellence resulted in positive achievement and academic growth in students.

Addressing Research Question 2

Principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional culture intertwined in each high school to promote academic growth in all students. There is a healthy attitude and vision that

started by making all students feel welcome. Ms. Parks, math teacher at Lincoln High

said, "The biggest thing that I do in the first two weeks is to get my kids to trust me.

They know that I will never embarrass them for any question that they ask me." Based

on the research, no significant learning takes place without an authentic relationship

between the teacher and the student (Cushman, 2013). In each high school, teachers

cared about the success of their students, were empathetic, and took the time to get to

know each of their students on a personal level. Ms. Braxton from Adams High went so

far as to include student likes and interests in her math problems on a weekly basis to

motivate student buy-in.

Collectively, administrators, teachers, and curriculum facilitators at each high

school worked together to develop authentic and engaging classrooms for all students.

Through relentless preparation and timely and purposeful feedback, classrooms were

providing valuable work, challenging activities, and opportunities for students to learn

and re-learn the curriculum. A common theme that existed in each high school was that

students learned best from their mistakes. Ms. Norris said, "You make a mistake, you

focus on what you missed, and then you learn from your mistake." Her colleague, Ms.

Parks added, "So the kids were learning from their mistakes and having that opportunity

it was a win-win because they were learning the material but then they got to increase

their score on what they made." Supported by the research, Guskey and Alderman

(2013) believe teachers should focus on mastery of content, allowing students to work on

tasks repeatedly, without penalty, until they achieve mastery. Critical to the success of

each high school, students were not penalized for a poor performance. Instead, they were

encouraged to turn weaknesses into strengths and work toward better understanding of

the curriculum through remediation and retesting efforts.

No one works in isolation. From the research, building leadership, PLCs, specific

classroom practices, and the culture and climate of the school all contribute to the

academic achievement of students (Burgess & Bates, 2009). Administrators participate

in professional development and collaborative planning sessions. Curriculum facilitators

co-plan and share ideas with teachers supporting frequent formative assessment to gauge

student mastery of the content. Students recognize the support from all stakeholders.

Staff care about students and enjoy what they were doing. Principal Jones of Lincoln

Senior High had a personal goal to always stay positive with his staff. "We are going to

take the challenges that come ahead of us and we are going to conquer those challenges

by working together. I am trying to create a cohesive team of teachers."

There also exists a culture of high expectations and students know that teachers

will hold them responsible for their learning. Accountability for being at one's best and

striving to meet the needs of all learners exists through the administration, among

teachers in collaborative meetings, and between students in the classroom. A healthy

sense of positive reinforcement and expectations to continually get better fuels the

students and staff in each high school. As Lincoln High Assistant Principal Ring says,

"There is a very healthy sense of we want to be at the top."

Research supports that the critical work of schools is done through relationships

among people (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2003). Dr. Clapp, assistant

principal at Adams High, claims, "As far as growth goes, a lot of it is up to the teachers,

how hard they push the students, ask the right questions, and try to create an interdependent team that pushes one another." Competitive and cooperative describes the relationships among staff in each high school. This ownership and pride in being the best is a competitive spirit that promotes striving for excellence in one's role. Deal and Peterson (2009) argue that relationships need to be nurtured and attended to so that conversations move beyond collegiality and collaboration to improving one's craft. The competitiveness exists in a healthy way with rival high schools battling to attain the same status of a high growth school.

In each high school, administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers are not hiding successful practices, ideas, or means of motivating students to learn. A cooperative effort to relentlessly plan and develop meaningful lesson plans supports a culture of sharing what practices are inspiring students and how plans can be tweaked for the betterment of the school. Every student matters and teachers take ownership for developing a classroom climate that encourages all students to participate and learn. Fisher, Fray, and Pumpian (2012) share that an effective school culture "will provide students a respectful mediating experience through which they can understand, examine, affirm, modify, or change understandings of the world and how they want to engage it" (p. 2). Across all three high schools, administrators took ownership to provide support and feedback to teachers, teachers prepared valuable work for students to thrive, and students were connected to the school community and held accountable for putting forth their best effort no matter the class.

Implications and Recommendations

High school cultures are often reluctant to share openly what is working and what is not working. Through this study, information and insight into the climate, practices, and behaviors of three high schools will potentially motivate others in the field to reflect on their own practices growing both personally or professionally. Opportunities to try new tactics or use a new learning strategy may stretch one's ability to reach every student, promoting academic growth in all. Information pertaining to the achievement of significant academic growth in all students is applicable to teachers, curriculum facilitators, and administrators which could benefit educators across the state of North Carolina.

Principal Pay Tied to School Growth

Interestingly, the NC General Assembly's 2017-2018 budget appropriates $35.4 million in new dollars to increase principal and assistant principal compensation based on school size, potential bonuses, and a growth component. Narrowing in on the growth component, a principal will be paid at the "exceeded growth" level if the school growth scores show the school exceeded expected growth in at least two of the last three years. A principal will be paid at the "met growth" level if either the school growth scores show the school met expected growth in at least two of the last three years or the school growth scores show the school met growth in at least one of the last three years and exceeded expected growth in one of the last three years. A principal will be paid at the "base" level if neither of the situations previously outlined apply (Hui, 2017).

Although this salary schedule pertains to principals only, it is cause for concern among building leaders in meeting standards set forth by the General Assembly. Recognizing principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision-making protocols, instructional practices, and school culture that is working efficiently in schools will benefit those in need of meeting the mark with academic growth in all students. But will some schools and building leaders be at an advantage? Or, does it all depend on the school, the leadership, and the teachers in the building? Based on this study and the consistent performance of three public high schools achieving significant academic growth, all students can learn. Through four critical themes, success rests on a school's execution and commitment to timely and purposeful feedback, collaboration and collegiality, intentional planning, and high expectations and standards of excellence. Each theme contributed to the academic success of students and was intertwined through daily practices and routines in each high school. No one worked in isolation. A collective effort and community of educators had a relentless passion to meet the unique needs of all learners. As Ms. Norris from Lincoln Senior High said, "I guess we would call it a failsafe—they don't have an option to slip through the cracks."

Questions related to the factors and variables that result in student academic growth will inevitably come up in conversation, as principal pay is a factor. With the opportunity to receive bonuses for achieving significant growth in students, building leaders will be sure to reflect and evaluate their current practices. Future research analyzing which communities and schools are achieving the most academic growth may become more common.

An Area for Further Research

This timely study enlightens the reader on what practices, routines, and structures led to academic success of all students (through the literature review) as well as how three specific schools were achieving significant academic growth in all students from one year to the next (through the findings and conclusion). Visiting three successful high schools, sharing insight and artifacts to help promote academic growth in students is sure to positively impact building leaders across the state of North Carolina.

To further stimulate research related to academic growth in all students, I pose a question. Are certain populations of students more likely to academically grow? Based on this study, none of the findings addressed culturally relevant practices.

In a rapidly changing world, with racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity existing in classrooms, comparing and contrasting student subgroups versus academic growth would be enlightening. Analyzing and evaluating how specific subgroups (Exceptional Children, Academically Gifted, Hispanic, Caucasian, African-American, English Learners, etc.) in the area of academic growth would be beneficial. Researching and studying how subgroups are performing in the area of academic growth has great impact on teaching practices and support of effective teaching practices that meet the needs of all learners regardless of what subgroup they are affiliated with.

The Increasing Need for Hands-On Professional Development for Administrators

Visiting three public high schools achieving significant gains in academic growth was both personally and professionally rewarding. As a high school principal, I learned about the successful practices and cultures of three unique schools more so than any

training or professional development session offered within our district. One of my goals was to improve my own leadership practice to positively influence our high school's performance. In my experience, professional development tends to cater to the needs of the teacher rather than how administrators support high quality instruction and professional culture. I argue that leadership preparation programs should include study of timely and purposeful feedback, collaboration and collegiality, intentional planning, and high expectations and standards of excellence in schools for the betterment of administrators and teachers. Debating and discussing how schools are achieving success in each of these areas will focus conversation on effective teaching and learning practices and provide good examples of what is working in current classrooms.

Does district policy regarding professional development take into account the wants and needs of administrators in support of high quality teaching and learning? Leadership preparatory programs prepare educators with theory and problems of practice but seeing what is working in current high schools was truly inspirational. Teacher preparatory programs do not necessarily prepare individuals to relentlessly plan, work collegially with colleagues to promote meaningful and challenging lessons, offer timely and purposeful feedback, or how to establish high expectations and standards of excellence for all students. Exploring how schools are achieving success was a valuable experience for me and I, too, believe it can be replicated in other buildings.

On a personal note, I know our administrative team can do a better job providing timely and purposeful feedback to teachers centered on the teaching and learning process. I also recognize that we can improve our creation and use of frequent formative

assessment to better check for student understanding and track mastery of standards. I also know that I am not the only principal that has room to grow in creating a culture of relentless planners and collaborators with high expectations for all students. For example, do we have the same expectations for students in an Advanced Placement course as we do in a remedial math course? Providing administrators with valuable professional development centered on what is currently working in schools should be a priority.

Final Thoughts

As the researcher, pertaining to my current role of high school principal, I set out to gain insight into how three high schools in the Piedmont Triad region are successfully meeting the exceeds growth mark as reported through EVAAS. Through in-depth interviews, follow-up interviews, and informal observations in each of the three high schools, I explored principal and teacher instructional leadership, shared instructional decision making, instructional practices, and professional cultures within each setting. I hope that educators across the state, and other building leaders in a similar role, will learn from this study or perhaps try a new instructional approach or strategy gleaned from my experiences.

Admittedly, as a school, Western Alamance High School had not met the mark in the state's accountability model for growth within the EOC subjects of math 1, English 2, and biology. As the principal of the school, I take ownership for that status and want to support change and improvement in our teaching and learning environment to meet the unique needs of all students. Each of the past two years, Western Alamance High has

fallen below two standard deviations from the mean landing us in the does not meet

growth category. Each of the three high schools that were studied posted growth ratings

above two standard deviations from the mean, labeling them exceeds growth high

schools. Their effective administrative and teacher leadership, collaborative work from

curriculum support and PLCs/PLTs/CASAs, purposeful, relevant, and inspiring actions of

the classroom teachers, and professional culture described by positive working

relationships with a sense of pride, purpose, and standard for excellence contributed to

their academic success.

From the work of Douglas Reeves (2006) and The Leadership and Learning

Center (Figure 2), the following matrix depicts the category and behaviors of Lincoln,

Washington, and Adams High versus where Western Alamance High (and perhaps other

high schools struggling to meet the mark) in the area of academic growth.

Effects/Results	**Lucky** High results, low understanding of antecedents. Replication of success unlikely.	**Leading** High results, high understanding of antecedents. Replication of success likely.
	Losing Low results, low understanding of antecedents. Replication of failure likely.	**Learning** Low results, high understanding of antecedents. Replication of mistakes unlikely.
	Antecedents/Cause Data (Adult Actions)	

Figure 2. The Leadership and Learning Matrix (Reeves, 2006).

Lincoln High School, Washington High School, and Adams High School all fell

into the Leading category (upper right quadrant) with strong actions and staff attitudes

yielding high student results. They are certainly not in the upper left-hand quadrant,

receiving high results based on luck or a whim. In contrast, there was a school-wide

effort in each school to challenge all students with relevant and meaningful activities

while providing the necessary support to regroup, reteach, and reassess promoting

students' mastery of the course standards. Western Alamance High school would fall

into the Learning category as our actions and attitudes are not yet strong enough to yield

the high results that the three studied high schools were achieving.

Common among Lincoln, Washington, and Adams High School staff embraced a

growth mindset and committed great time and energy to intentionally plan lessons tightly

aligned to the state standards, frequently assessed students, tracked their individual

progress along with the progress of the class, and provided opportunities for students to

reach mastery of each standard. Teachers moved beyond a traditional approach to

classroom instruction promoting rich dialogue and discussion, incorporating collaborative

activities with students manipulating the content, and frequent use of formative

assessment allowed for differentiation of instruction based on student results with 21st-

Century tools and technology to meet each student's unique needs.

To capture the most important factors contributing to schools that meet the mark

in achieving high academic growth in all students, I propose the following action plan to

support and sustain high quality teaching and learning:

1. Intentional Planning—relentlessly plan, every teacher needs to unpack their

    standards to learn them inside and out. Lesson plans must be tightly aligned

    to course standards with opportunities for students to manipulate the content.

The work must be valuable and challenging. Students need to buy in to the curriculum—make it relevant and interesting with connections to the real world and the lives of the students.

2. Purposeful Feedback—feedback must be timely and purposeful from administrators to teachers to hold teachers accountable for high quality instruction. In addition, students must receive feedback from teachers through frequent formative assessment. Students need to take ownership for their learning tracking their own data and working toward mastery of standards. Depending on their level of mastery, scaffolding needs to take place to remediate or enhance student learning in the form of differentiated instruction.

3. Collaboration and Collegiality—administrators, curriculum facilitators, and teachers must have critical, honest conversation centered on teaching and learning. Analysis of student data through formative assessment results will capture student understanding or areas of weakness. By checking for understanding, students may be grouped in three separate tiers based on their mastery of the content. A collective effort to meet the needs of all learners can help provide the scaffolding that students need. Turning weaknesses into strengths requires sharing lesson plans, useful interactive websites, and other plans to differentiate instruction. Working together holding each other accountable for learning will create a healthy climate and further promote a growth mindset.

4. High Expectations and Standards of Excellence—all students matter and
   should feel welcomed in a classroom. No matter the class, core or elective, all
   students should be held to a high standard. The work in all aspects of the
   curriculum should be valuable, relevant, and challenging. Developing a
   healthy sense of pride and purpose will connect students to the school and
   enhance their potential for academic growth. Students should pushed to
   produce high quality work.

Executing all four critical components of the plan for successful academic growth
of students requires commitment and perseverance. Most importantly, as proven by
dedicated teachers, curriculum facilitators, and administrators, these high yield teaching
and learning strategies can be replicated. Through this study, readers can take the
successful practices, structures, routines, and ideas that emerged from each of the three
schools to improve their own practice or school. Insightful thoughts from principals,
curriculum facilitators, and teachers may spark interest and are worth trying in a
classroom setting. In addition, educators may utilize an artifact, such as the walkthrough
form or student data tracker, adapting it to fit their needs.

This study will help support all educators by addressing how high schools are
achieving high academic growth in all students. Although there is not a one size fits all
solution to achieve high academic growth in all students, timely and purposeful feedback
to teachers and students, a collaborative work culture with relentless planners sharing
their thoughts and ideas, frequent formative assessment to track student data, and high

standards to hold all students and staff accountable were paramount to the success of each high school.

Classrooms are becoming more and more diverse with students from a variety of backgrounds, developmental levels, and learning styles. Principals, instructional leaders, teachers share the responsibility of providing high quality instruction for all students. All need to devote time, energy, study, enthusiasm, and hard work to create a school culture of commitment to each and every student and change for the better. Across each school were extraordinary teachers, curriculum facilitators, and administrators that believed that all students could learn, shared a sense of purpose to meet the unique needs of all students, and had a passion to provide every child with a quality education to improve academically from one year to the next.

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APPENDIX A

PRINCIPAL/AP/CF/AC INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your leadership style.

2. Describe your ideal teacher. What are you looking for when hiring new staff?

3. Describe your ideal teaching environment.

4. What are your expectations for your classroom teachers in their development of relevant and meaningful lesson plans?

5. As a school that met the "exceeds growth" mark, how have you, as an educational leader, had an impact on that?

6. What are some of the non-negotiables that you have with your staff as it relates to their classroom instructional practices?

7. How do you provide your staff time to collaborate?

8. What structures are in place to support ongoing professional development?

9. If you could attribute the academic success of your students to only a couple of key components, what would they be?

10. How do you use data to drive your support of high quality teaching and learning?

11. How do you motivate your teachers to challenge their students engaging them in higher levels of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy?

12. How is differentiation of instruction implemented and supported in your school?

13. How do you use technology in your role as an educational leader to support a 21st century teaching and learning environment?

14. How do you foster creativity with your teaching staff?

15. What does engaging instruction look like to you and what do you do to foster it in your teachers?

APPENDIX B

DEPARTMENT CHAIR/TEACHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your lesson today?

2. How do you design your lessons to meet the unique needs of your students, i.e. differentiate instruction?

3. What supports or structures are in place from administration to help you succeed as a classroom teacher?

4. How do you check for understanding to ensure students are mastering the content?

5.   How do you promote classroom rigor and high expectations?

6. In what ways do you collaborate with your colleagues?

7.   How do you infuse technology in your classroom to promote engagement?

8. What types of formative assessment strategies do you use to gather feedback from your students?

9. As a school that met the "exceeds growth" mark, what specific strategies or practices fostered such high growth in students?

10. How do you challenge students with relevant and meaningful lessons that move up to higher levels of Revised Bloom's Taxonomy?

11. In what ways do you foster creativity in your classroom?

12. Describe your subject area PLC? How does your PLC drive your instructional practices?

13. What does an engaged classroom look like to you? What strategies and/or practices do you use to keep your students engaged?

APPENDIX C

A SAMPLE WALKTHROUGH TOOL FOR TIMELY AND PURPOSEFUL FEEDBACK RELATED TO AUTHENTIC AND ENGAGED CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

- Grade Level
  - 9
  - 10
  - 11
  - 12
  - Multiple Grades

- Period
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4

- Time During Class
  - Beginning
  - Middle
  - End

- Content Area
  - CTE
  - EC/OCS
  - English
  - Math
  - Science
  - Social Studies
  - World Language
  - Fine Arts
  - JROTC
  - Student Services
  - Healthful Living/PE
  - Other

- Social Support for Student Achievement—The Learning Environment
  Check all that apply
  - Teacher posts learning target or essential question
  - Teacher posts classroom expectations
  - Teacher reinforces procedures

- o Teacher promotes high expectations
- o Teacher provides constructive feedback
- o Teacher provides a climate of mutual respect
- o Teacher promotes rigor
- o Teacher models positive interaction
- o Teacher differentiates instruction
- o Teacher manages students positively
- o Teacher supports cultural diversity
- o Teacher ensures high student participation
- o Teacher adjusts instruction based upon student understanding
- o Teacher provides appropriate wait time
- o Other: _____

- Substantive Conversation—Authentic Engagement
  Check all that apply
  - o Students formulate and ask questions
  - o Teacher formulates and asks questions
  - o Students collaborate to build collective understanding
  - o Teacher lectures predominantly
  - o Students communicate knowledge to others
  - o Teacher-to-student content conversation
  - o Student-to-student content conversation
  - o Teacher gives constructive feedback
  - o Other: _____

- Thinking Skill Level/Depth of Knowledge—Rigor
  Check all that apply
  - o Students recall facts
  - o Students demonstrate and/or explain
  - o Students compare and contrast information
  - o Students summarize and take notes
  - o Students synthesize content knowledge
  - o Students solve problems
  - o Students think critically
  - o Teacher probes for deeper thinking
  - o Teacher solves problems for students
  - o Other: _____

- Connectedness to the World—The Value of Student Learning
  Check all that apply
  - o Students seek to solve real-world problems
  - o Students apply personal experiences
  - o Students advocate solutions to problems
  - o Students create products or performances

- o Teachers use technology to promote relevance
- o Teachers link prior knowledge/experience
- o Teachers provide relevant connections
- o Other: _____

- Comments/Opportunities for Growth

APPENDIX D

PLC/PLT/CASA MINUTES

Please complete and submit weekly during your collaborative meeting time.

1. Staff Present

    _____

2. Subject Area

    _____

Analyzing Data
Please be as specific as possible. Data collected is used to support our SIP goals.

3. What standard(s) have you covered since your last PLC?

4. List specific data you collected regarding the standard(s) you listed above.

5. What specifically are you doing in class to support those students who were not successful with the standard listed above?

Lesson Planning

6. What standard(s) are you covering in the upcoming week?

7. Which research based strategies will you use to support your instruction of the standard(s) listed above?

8. Students should be actively manipulating the content for approximately half each class period. List specific examples of how this will occur this week.

APPENDIX E

ENGLISH 2 EOC GOAL TRACKER AND A BIOLOGY STUDENT DATA TRACKER

My goal for the English 2 EOC is to make a (circle one):

LEVEL V
LEVEL IV
LEVEL III
LEVEL II
LEVEL I

Benchmark & Common Assessment Data Tracker

100					Level V 94% & Above
90					Level IV 81% - 93%
80					Level III 77% - 80%
70					Level II 67% - 76%
60					Level I 66% & Below
50					
40					
	1st Benchmark	Midterm Exam	2nd Benchmark	EOC Goal	

Understanding the Standards in Your Own Words

Power Standards I Have Mastered (list each Power Standard & Summative Assessment score):

Unit 1:	Unit 2:	Unit 3:
Unit 4:	Unit 5:	Unit 6:

Identify Your EOC Standard Strengths (based on USA Test Prep Progress Data):
- 66% or greater = strength, less than 66% = weakness

RL
RI

Identify Your EOC Standard Weaknesses (based on USA Test Prep Progress Data):
- 66% or greater = strength, less than 66% = weakness

RL
RI

EOC English II Standards

Standard	RL Literature Text	RI Informational Text
10.1	Textual evidence, using inferences or finding directly stated	
10.2	Theme, central idea, summary	Central idea & details, objective summary
10.3	How individuals, events, ideas interact	How events or ideas are developed or connected

Standard	RL Literature Text	RI Informational Text
10.4	Word choice (tone, mood), word meaning, figurative language	Word choice, (tone, mood), word meaning, figurative language and technical
10.5	Text structure and Impact	Text structure and Impact
10.6	Author's point of view, cultural experience	Author's point of view or purpose, use of rhetoric
10.7	2 different artistic mediums	2 different mediums
10.8	N/A	Evaluate & analyze an argument

Biology Assessment/Re-Assessment Student Data Tracker

Name: _____ Class: _____ Block: _____

Assessment by Standard	Score	Re-Assessment by Standard	Re-Score
2.01 & 4 Quiz		2.01 & 4 Re-Quiz	
4.1.1			
4.1.3			
2.02 Quiz		2.02 Re-Quiz	
1.1.1			
1.1.2			
1.1.3			
1.2.3			
2.03 Quiz		2.03 Re-Quiz	
1.2.1			
4.2.2			
Standard 2 Test		Standard 2 Re-Test	