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Students deserve teachers who are going to help them grow in their education and who are going to challenge them. No longer should it be allowed to continue this disservice to students; the literature states that students lose ground and fall further behind when they are in classrooms taught by ineffective teachers. Since teacher quality is at the forefront of educational research, it is essential that researchers discover the factors that contribute to quality teaching, especially since “teacher quality is the single most important feature of the schools that drives student achievement” (Haskins & Loeb, 2007, p. 53).

The purpose of this study is to share the stories of principals who worked with ineffective teachers and how tangling with these teachers affected these principals personally, professionally, and politically. I explored the actions and emotions of ten different principals who crafted action plans, collaborated with supervisors and site-based administrative teams, and either saw success from their strategic coaching or saw teachers walk away because the pressure was too much.

One major finding of this study is that not a single principal wanted to ultimately dismiss their teacher; they wanted the teacher to grow and become better for students. Additionally, there was no set time period other than the minimum 90-day timeline; one principal worked with one teacher off and on for over 6 years! Every principal agonized over their teacher, the students s/he was serving and achievement.

There are several implications for the conclusions of this study for future practice. These included providing professional development for administrators on having tough conversations with struggling teachers, offering them practice at giving effective feedback to teachers, and helping them understand the laws and local school board policies that affect teachers and teacher practice. Our principals also need to know that teacher quality matters and that the biggest predictor of student achievement is effective teaching.

PRINCIPAL STORIES OF WORKING WITH INEFFECTIVE TEACHERS

by

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Approved by

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This dissertation is dedicated to all of my family and friends that have supported and encouraged me along my journey in pursuit of higher education. Thank you for never giving up on me and always cheering me on!

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Jennifer M. Hardin, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Education is the key to future success. In the wake of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983), the driving force for change in education came from business leaders and state governors who were deeply concerned about a faltering economy and the threat of international competition. This led to a state of panic in terms of finding ways to dramatically improve American education. The sense of inadequate performance in comparison to other nations was also highlighted: “What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments” (NCEE, 1983, p. 112). They saw the “mediocre education system as a part of the big problem” (Moe & Chubb, 2009, p. 35). The ideas that were generated to improve our nation’s schools were to invest money more wisely, adopt a more rigorous curriculum, and boost the quality of teachers.

In the years following *A Nation at Risk*, we saw evidence of increased spending per-pupil but no significant achievement gain was noted. In the efforts to strengthen the curriculum (Moe & Chubb, 2009), we saw evidence of the appearance of rigor but not necessarily academic rigor. Students were again not making the expected academic gains. If students fail, the possibilities that education affords them vanish. Attempts to improve teacher quality were also met with disappointment as reformers met teacher

unions head on in their attempts to reform evaluations, certification, and the job security of teachers.

Dramatically improving education means ensuring that every student has an effective teacher in every classroom, every single school year. Daniel Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Education Data and Research at the University of Washington, who has studied issues of teacher performance for more than a decade, indicates that his years of research show that teacher effectiveness is important for student growth (Will, 2018). “Marginally performing teachers will test our commitment to improvement” (Tucker, 2001, p. 52). Former Washington, DC schools chief Michelle Rhee found that reforming the quality of teachers was one of her toughest challenges (Whitmire, 2011) as she began to try to turn around the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). DCPS was widely known as the lowest-performing and most dysfunctional school district in the country. The most shocking statistic that validated this was the achievement gap of 70 percentage points between the performance of White and Black students (Whitmire, 2011).

School districts with these same problems can be found all around our nation and our students deserve better. If we are going to dream of our students competing globally in math, science, and reading skills, we must decrease the achievement gaps and increase the competency of teachers in the classrooms. “Expert opinion and empirical research indicate that 5 to 15 percent of the 2.7 million teachers in public school classrooms perform at incompetent levels” (Tucker, 2001, p. 52). Educators lack control over every element affecting a child’s educational success that reside outside schools, but they do

have tremendous influence over what transpires in their classrooms. “We know that when low performing students are placed with highly proficient teachers, the achievement gap can be substantially reduced while raising the success for all students” (Marshall, 2016, p. 2).

Policymakers across the nation are leading efforts to ensure that every classroom has an effective teacher. Faced with the need to dramatically improve student outcomes, states have embraced a policy agenda that promotes and supports teacher quality in many ways, including developing evaluation and compensation policies, targeting professional development, determining the characteristics of effective teachers through research, and identifying effective teacher preparation programs. (Data Quality Campaign, 2012)

Although incompetent teachers represent a relatively small proportion of the nation’s teaching force, the number of students who are being taught by these teachers is substantial.

If we assume that 5 percent of the teachers in the public elementary and secondary school are incompetent (Johnson, 1984; Neill and Custis, 1978), the number of students who are being taught by these teachers exceeds the total combined public school enrollments of 14 states: Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhoda Island, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. (Bridges, 1986, p. 37)

Students and parents are not the only ones being shortchanged by these incompetent teachers; these poor performers also tarnish the majority of America’s teachers who are competent and conscientious professionals. This is a dark shadow that has been cast over thousands of competent teachers, who many feel are underpaid and under-appreciated for their accomplishments.



In North Carolina, G.S. 115C-12(22) requires the State Board of Education to monitor and compile an annual report on the decisions of teachers to leave the teaching profession. This attrition data is summarized into five categories from the 28 reasons LEAs use to code their attritions. Those five categories are:

1. Teachers who left the LEA but remained in education,
2. Teachers who left the LEA for personal reasons,
3. Teachers who were terminated by the LEA,
4. Teachers who left the LEA for reasons beyond the LEA's control, and
5. Teachers who left the LEA for reasons not listed above

In a 2018 annual report to the NC General Assembly, the 2016-2017 state of the teaching profession statistics were gathered. Teacher turnover or attrition is self-reported with five categories with one being teachers who were terminated by their LEA. One of the key finding shared stated,

On average, teachers who leave employment with the state have lower teaching effectiveness (as measured by EVAAS index scores) than their counterparts who remain employed in NC public schools. This relationship holds true when departing teachers are compared with remaining teachers in terms of years of teaching experience. (NCDPI, 2018, p. 6)

Nearly 8% (7.8%) of the teachers who left teaching in North Carolina cited their reason as initiated by the LEA meaning any of the following; dismissal, non-renewed, interim contract ended—not rehired, resigned in lieu of dismissal, resigned in lieu of non-renewal, and not maintaining their license. On average, those teachers leaving

employment in NC public schools had lower EVAAS index scores than those teachers who remained employed during the same period of time.

The 2016-2017 report from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) to the North Carolina General Assembly reflects a total teaching population of 94,792 across the state. 646 teachers were noted under the category for turnover initiated by the LEA, which represents 7.8% of the total NC teacher attrition. The 7.8% of teachers who left teaching in North Carolina cited their reason as initiated by the LEA meaning any of the following; dismissal, non-renewed, interim contract ended—not rehired, resigned in lieu of dismissal, resigned in lieu of non-renewal, and not maintaining their license. On average, those teachers leaving employment in NC public schools had lower EVAAS index scores than those teachers who remained employed during the same period of time. Table 1 notes the various reasons for the turnover.

Table 1

Turnover Initiated by LEA

Reasons for Turnover Initiated	Frequency
Dismissed	21
Non-renewal (probationary contract ended)	125
Interim contract ended—not rehired	257
Resigned in lieu of dismissal	111
Resigned in lieu of non-renewal	55
Did not obtain or maintain license	77
<b>Total</b>	<b>646</b>

With this information being self-reported by the very teachers leaving, there is a need to reiterate that these numbers are not finite and a true reflection of the total number of teachers dismissed across the state. Table 1 does leave us wondering, how many additional teachers left that did not report their turnover. These numbers do not reflect the total number of teachers across the state who are displaying characteristics of an incompetent teacher and in whom principals must focus their attention and energy.

### **The Principal's Roles in Instructional Improvement**

The principal must serve as the instructional leader. "State legislatures have mandated that principals serve as instructional leaders, and school districts have written their job descriptions for principals to include a reference to instructional leadership" (DuFour, 2002, p. 12). This is not a new concept or idea. In fact, go back thirty years to see evidence of the interpretation of what principals do pointing to instructional leadership in their school buildings. De Bevoise (1984) shared that instructional leadership can be defined as those actions that a principal takes to promote learning. He said that this includes setting school wide goals, defining the purpose and mission of schooling, and supervising and evaluating teachers. In a study that De Bevoise referenced by Blumberg and Greenfield from 1980 where they were trying to determine the characteristics or qualities of an effective principal, he noted, "the principals that they observed were not willing to simply 'keep the peace' and maintain a smooth-running organization. To some degree, all were innovators constantly seeking ways to effect school improvement with an emphasis on student learning" (De Bevoise, 1984, p. 16). Fast forward 30 years, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

(ASCD) still includes information about the need to provide effective instructional leadership in the resources they publish. Schwanke (2016) reminds principals that instructional leadership is a little different and that it can be a little daunting. One thing we all must realize is that “good instruction” changes with the times and in response to new research.

Principals should be willing to make changes when needed to get students and teachers moving in a different direction based on student achievement data. They should not shy away from having that difficult conversation with a teacher when it is needed and should be willing to invest in the improvement of that teacher. Several research studies were noted in De Bevoise’s (1984) article and the overall theme was the notion that all of the researchers shared an understanding for what the role of the instructional leader is— “to communicate a vision of the school’s purposes and standards, monitoring student and teacher performance, recognizing and rewarding the good work, and providing effective staff development programs” (De Bevoise, 1984, p. 20). Schwanke (2016) notes that some of the strategies she (Schwanke) suggests for effective instructional leadership include:

- think like a coach
- use your teacher leaders
- seek to understand the basics of curriculum
- support PLC work
- talk about instruction constantly

- set clear expectations
- reflect, identify and provide professional resources

“Being an instructional leader does not mean that you are the master of all content and curriculum. It means that you know what good instruction looks like and that you know how to continue to promote a culture of learning and growth” (Schwanke, 2016, p. 63).

Since the researchers were in agreement back in the mid-1980s about the role of monitoring a teacher’s performance as part of a principal’s role of being an instructional leader and providing effective staff development programs (De Bevoise, 1984; Schwanke, 2016), a foundation has been laid for principals as instructional leaders who make informed decisions about the continued practice of a classroom teacher through their observations and available data.

School principals who focus on a vision for their schools nurture the leadership capabilities in their teachers, because nothing is more important than ensuring successful student learning. When our teachers are not implementing instruction effectively, then principals, as instructional leaders, are expected to step in to monitor the instruction and the lesson planning more closely. Principals can build trust in their teachers when they visit classrooms and are able to support and nurture teacher development by providing feedback that will help teachers improve. “Talking with staff members about their work—where they feel they are effective, where they struggle, what challenges them—is a way to build powerful, trusting relationships with your staff” (Schwanke, 2016, p. 73). Principals are in the position to help teachers improve in areas of weakness and can accomplish this through observations and dialogue that shows respect for teachers as

professionals. “Shorter classroom drop-ins might provide helpful, more immediate feedback for a teacher” (Will, 2018, p. 5).

It is important to evaluate the quality of teaching in order to recruit and retain good teachers. It is also equally as important to make informed decisions regarding the quality of teaching and communicate plans for improvement when needed.

Principals rate nearly all teachers as “effective,” but when principals are asked their opinions of teachers in confidence, they’re much more likely to give harsh ratings. Principals point to the need for positive relationships with their staff members, concerns about teacher turnover, and a lack of time as potential reasons for the score inflation. (Will, 2018, p. 5)

The goal is simple: improve teacher intentionality in the classroom. Being intentional allows us to move beyond the mundane tasks of being a teacher and moving closer to the focus on why and thus the reason for teaching. When teachers begin to focus on the reason for their teaching, richer questioning emerges which will guide instruction and elicit a difference in the classroom. “If students are happy, safe, and growing, you have an effective teacher on your hands” (Schwanke, 2016, p. 83). Beyond that, when improvement is not noted following a plan of improvement, a plan for recommending dismissal should follow to continue moving along the continuum for dismissal. What is the best course of action when a teacher struggles in the classroom?

### **Ineffective Teachers—The Problem**

Teachers have the opportunity to prepare the next generation of skilled workers and good citizens, and this is not a job that can be taken lightly. Taxpayers and policymakers are calling for it to be easier to get rid of bad or ineffective teachers

according to Barrett (2010) and Alanez (2011), two newspaper correspondents. Yet, there are teacher unions in some states that “are adamantly opposed to reforms that might allow administrators to remove even the most poorly performing teachers from the classroom” (Moe & Chubb, 2009, p. 37).

Moe and Chubb (2009) ascertain that “teacher quality could be improved if the dismissal of mediocre and incompetent teachers were easier to accomplish—instead of being virtually impossible” (p. 37). A part of the problem in dismissing teachers for not meeting the expected standards deals with the teacher tenure laws. “Tenure laws are designed to assure competent teachers continued employment as long as their performance is satisfactory” (Thomas, Cambron-McCabe, & McCarthy, 2009, p. 412). However, the question becomes, is everyone using the same definition of satisfactory? If they are, what is it? And if they are, why are ineffective teachers in the classroom with our students? What will it take to give our students the very best?

### **What Do Teacher Organizations Say about Teacher Incompetence?**

Many teacher organizations pride themselves on being the voice of education professionals. They desire to advocate for education professionals and to prepare every student to succeed. The National Education Association (NEA) also believes that “every student in America, regardless of family income or place of residence, deserves a quality education” (NEA’s Vision, Mission and Values adopted in 2006). The NEA boasts that they are willing to step in when an educator is unfairly targeted for dismissal by administrators. “What’s guaranteed is not the job, but the due process, and sometimes

someone has to make sure the guarantee is carried out, which is one reason educators need their Association” (Jehlen, 2011, p. 6).

In a January 2015 news release, the NEA is quoted as saying that they “promote fair due process procedures like tenure that prevent good teachers from being fired for bad reasons” (NEA, 2015, p. 1). In the same press release, we also see that “If we’re serious about ensuring that, regardless of his or her zip code, every student has access to the best teachers . . .” (NEA, 2015, p. 3). This teacher organization will certainly help fight a potential teacher dismissal but still wants the very best in every classroom.

Teacher organizations are clear that they believe only the very best teachers should be in front of our students leading them in the classroom. They are also very clear in that they will advocate and support any educator along the lines of due process. Due process ensures that all teachers have the right to know why they are being dismissed or, disciplined and have a right to a hearing. Teacher organizations decide which teachers they are going to support, but it is unclear how they determine if they are fighting for an effective classroom teacher or if they are fighting for one of the very classroom teachers they would not want their own child to have?

### **The Dismissal of Teachers**

There are myths or traditions surrounding the dismissal of teachers. Michelle Rhee found this out quickly in DCPS.

In only a few weeks, the firings began to stack up and the department’s general counsel advised her to knock it off. Why? demanded Rhee. They’re incompetent! The answer: Welcome to District of Columbia Public Schools, where we never fire anyone. Incompetence, it turned out, usually was not enough. The only way anyone got fired, he explained, was to get caught hitting a



kid (on videotape . . . multiple witnesses were insufficient) or get caught stealing money. (Whitmire, 2011, p. 82)

Another reason to not dismiss a teacher might be related to the amount of paperwork and time involved in documenting the incompetency and/or ineffectiveness of a teacher. Or there could be a fear of backlash from the teacher union with which the teacher is associated. Or maybe there is the fear of breaking the status quo—because this sort of thing [dismissing an ineffective teacher] has never been done before at this particular school or district. No matter the reason or the tradition, ineffectiveness should not continue to remain in our classrooms. To allow it to continue is to say to that we do not value the learning of students or the integrity or professionalism of the rest of our staff. “A teacher’s effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor controlled by school systems” (MET Project, 2010, p. 1). Darling-Hammond (2010) shares about a recent study done in North Carolina among high school students that found that the achievement of students was significantly higher if:

1. They were taught by a teacher who was certified in his or her teaching field,
2. They [the teacher] was fully prepared upon entry,
3. The teacher had higher scores on the teacher licensing test,
4. The teacher graduated from a competitive college,
5. They [the teacher] had taught more than 2 years,
6. And they were national board certified.

Darling-Hammond's (2010) study concluded that

the difference in student achievement between having a very well-qualified teacher rather than a poorly qualified one was larger than the average difference in achievement between a typical White student with college-educated parents and a typical Black student with high school-education parents. (p. 43)

A similar study of teachers in New York City also found that a student's achievement was most enhanced with a fully certified teacher and a student's achievement was harmed most by having an inexperienced teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Allowing an ineffective teacher to continue in the classroom can be detrimental to the principal and to the staff of the school. The increase in public awareness to teachers being the most inequitably distributed school resource led to Congress adding a provision to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 "that states should ensure that all students have access to 'highly qualified teachers,' defined as teachers with full certification and demonstrated competence in the subject-matter field(s) they teach" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 44). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) approved by the U.S. Congress in December 2015 is the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This law provides significant federal support for programs and replaces the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. Table 2 notes comparisons between NCLB and ESSA (ASCD, 2015) and its implications for ensuring teacher effectiveness.

A study using the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System found that "students who are assigned to ineffective teachers for several consecutive years have significantly lower achievement and lower gains than those who are assigned to highly effective teachers for several years running" (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001, p. 201). Darling-

Hammond (2000) conducted an analysis of teacher qualification and its relation to student achievement. Her findings indicate that the measure of teacher preparation and certification are by far the strongest correlates of student achievement in both reading and math.

Table 2

Comparison of No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ASCD, 2015)

<b>No Child Left Behind</b>	<b>Every Student Succeeds Act</b>	<b>ASCD Position</b>
<p>Requires 100% of teachers in core academic subjects to be “highly qualified,” which is defined as follows: Existing teachers must have a bachelor’s degree, demonstrate subject matter knowledge in the areas they teach, and hold a certification or license in the subject they teach. New teachers must have a bachelor’s degree and pass subject-matter tests.</p>	<p>Eliminates highly qualified teacher requirements. Requires state plans to provide assurance that all teachers and paraprofessionals working in programs supported by Title I-A funds meet state certification and licensure requirements.</p>	<p>Each student should have access to highly effective teachers in every subject and discipline. Effective teaching leads to ongoing student achievement and growth; is based on evidence; and incorporates knowledge and skills into planning and preparation, classroom management, instruction, and subject content.</p>

### **Purpose Statement**

If Tucker is correct in claiming that 5–15% of our teacher work force is performing at incompetent work levels, there may be at least one of those teachers at each of our schools. The intent of this study is to benefit building level school administrators and central office staff by providing narrative experiences of how principals support and

possibly move for the dismissal of an incompetent teacher. Wisdom and research into how an ineffective teacher can negatively impact students academically will be shared and will be the driving force behind the need for reform. This study also sheds light onto the process for working with an ineffective teacher first by implementing an action plan designed to see instructional improvements and then by working with the Human Resources department to make a recommendation for dismissing this teacher. The effects of ineffective teachers and their possible dismissal on the school leader and on the school will also be examined. This study will portray real experiences of school principals and current Central Office staff to clearly establish the view from both lenses in a narrative form.

I looked deeper into this problem of ineffective teachers in our classrooms. I am more concerned about those situations in which a teacher has come under scrutiny because of student academic performance. How do principals move forward when they have identified the problem as teaching—academic, pedagogical, instructional, content knowledge, etc.?

### **Methods**

I conducted a qualitative study where I interviewed ten principals or former administrators across one Local Education Agency who have made recommendations for dismissal for teachers or begun the process for dismissing a teacher for being ineffective in the classroom. I defined the process of beginning the process of dismissing a teacher as establishing a directed action plan for this teacher and moving forward with its implementation. Each principal was interviewed three times to gain enough insight into

how ineffectiveness was determined; to understand how the process was put into place in order to help the teacher grow and improve, who was responsible for supervising and coaching during the implementation of this plan, and how the decision was made to recommend dismissal; the delivery of the dismissal to the teacher; and the toll that the entire process took on the principal and the staff. Each interview looked to answer these questions and how this process affected the principal professionally, personally and politically. A similar study (Donaldson & Mavrogordato, 2018) examined the efforts of one school district to improve low performing teachers through evaluation. They reviewed how school leaders use high stakes evaluations to either improve or if necessary, remove a low performing teacher from their school. Donaldson and Mavrogordato found that both cognitive and relational were important in a school leaders' improvement efforts with a low performing teacher however, the organizational factors were most important when attempting to remove a low performing teacher.

### **Research Questions**

The study investigated the following research questions:

1. How do principals determine the ineffectiveness of a teacher?
2. What action plan and thought process does the principal use to grow and improve a teacher who is identified as ineffective?
3. How do principals come to the decision that a teacher should be dismissed?
4. How did this process affect the principal professionally, personally, politically?

5. What effects does the dismissal process have on the principal's practice?
6. What effects on school climate, culture, and operations do principals describe?

### **Importance/Significance of Study**

The ways that school leaders respond to performance concerns can vary widely—and may not always be effective. In a case study printed in the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, “Get Rid of Incompetent Teachers, Any Way You Can!,” a scenario is presented that illustrates why there is a need for quality teachers in every classroom and why the ineffective ones need to be removed. The new principal in this study has just gotten a transfer teacher to her school, a veteran with 17 years teaching experience who has apparently been an ineffective teacher the entire time but nothing was ever documented or done about it.

So I get this person here and starting day one I get complaints from students, parents, and other staff members. So here I am beginning to document this teacher. Well, first of all, I am very, very, angry at [the lack of documentation in the past]. Suddenly it looks like I am picking on this teacher who has never had any documentation . . . Bottom line, is that he is not nutty enough yet to be taken out of the classroom. Until he does something really bad, like physically assaults someone or something equally bad, I am not going to be able to do anything. I just have to keep documenting . . . I think he is harming kids on a daily basis, all kinds of kids, kids who were not even the target of his abuse are bothered. I don't think it is a safe place for students . . . The staff recognize the problem. They have come in and told me things about him that I didn't know . . . Every profession has incompetence. But there are also standards that need to be met. And [teacher unions] protect even those who don't meet the standards. And unless you really do something totally illegal it is hard to get rid of them. (Covrig, 2001, pp. 4–5)

This scenario, although fictional, begs the question of how often this really happens. How often are there teachers in schools who are ineffective, who have always

been ineffective, and yet they return year after year only to waste the time of students? High standards for teaching our nation's children should be evident in the people put in the classrooms to lead those students. High quality teachers must be put into classrooms that will challenge and stimulate intellectual growth in children while building 21st century skills.

One of the core goals of the No Child Left Behind legislation, which was known as a blueprint for education reform, was to address the need to improve teacher quality (Walsh, 2004). NCLB was the 2002 update to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB affirmed the importance of measuring the achievement of all students and ensuring that every child be performing at or above grade level by 2014. The Every Student Succeeds Act (December 2015) leaves accountability roles almost entirely up to each state. "Despite conservative estimates that 5 percent of teachers are incompetent, the termination rate—which includes resignations, dismissals of tenured teachers, and non-renewals of probationary teachers—is less than 1 percent" (Tucker, 2001, p. 52).

Darling-Hammond (2010) suggested that significant ground is lost with students with every ineffective teacher they have. We can only hope that those students regain the instruction they lost while in an ineffective teacher's classroom, but the reality that the loss of instruction they had during one school year may take several years to regain. This time spent on recovering and relearning prior information can cause students to continue to lose ground on current material, as they struggle, falling further behind. In the meantime, are they mastering current instruction, or falling behind in that too as they try

to master the basic skills first? It is a vicious cycle that administrators have an obligation to end.

Many principals use remediation to assist poorly performing teachers and have shared that “approximately half of the teachers identified as incompetent improved after participating in a remediation process” (Tucker, 2001, p. 52). These increasing levels of assistance to individual teachers can become a demanding challenge that administrators face when coupled with trying to meet high standards of growth in their schools. Other school employees may be associated with monitoring a teacher’s action plan, which causes them to neglect some of their assigned duties. Often, teachers in our school buildings try to pick up the slack of the ineffective teacher by making lesson plans for them, pulling some of their students to teach, or giving up their planning time to work with the teacher. As schools are pressured to produce greater student learning results and more hurdles are placed in front of principals who are trying to get rid of incompetent teachers, dismissals become less likely, which means our students suffer. “Whole-school improvement won’t happen unless everyone performs well” (Tucker, 2001, p. 53). Schools cannot be brought forward if what is holding us back is not addressed.

Above all, the research in this study is designed to aid other administrators, and ensure that they have some models for how to handle an ineffective teacher from those who have gone down the path before them. If principals avoid pursuing dismissal because there is a shortage of past experiences to learn from—does the message to students become it is okay for you to fail? In classrooms, only the best qualified people need to be in front of students, bottom line. Students deserve teachers who are going to



help them grow in their education and who are going to challenge them. No longer should it be allowed to continue this disservice to students; the literature states that students lose ground and fall further behind when they are in classrooms taught by ineffective teachers. It should be unacceptable for an ineffective teacher to continue impacting students in such a negative manner. School leaders cannot back down from important battles—help the individuals involved map out a change and insist upon improvement.

Since teacher quality is at the forefront of educational research, it is essential that researchers discover the factors that contribute to quality teaching, especially since “teacher quality is the single most important feature of the schools that drives student achievement” (Haskins & Loeb, 2007, p. 53). For the purpose of this study, teacher quality is defined in terms of the key principles central to effective teaching as purposed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Curriculum (INTASC). Teachers must understand their subject matter and be able to relate it to their students, differentiate their teaching strategies and assessments to meet the needs of their students, and continually evaluate curriculum and engage in professional development (INTASC, 2011). We are also seeing the introduction of state assessments for all content areas that will generate a measurable number based on the proficiency of our students.

### **Preview of Chapters**

In Chapter II, I provide a literature review in which I examine teacher quality theories, studies, and needs, as well as outline the role of school leaders as it relates to their work with incompetent teachers. A conceptual framework is established from this

research. In this chapter, I also detail what the law states, plans for improvement, and the dismissal process, including statistics.

In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology. I describe the interview process, the characteristics of the subjects being interviewed and the nature of their interview protocols that include an examination of how working with an incompetent teacher impacted them personally, professionally, and politically. Information about my subjects and why they were selected will also be highlighted. In Chapter IV, I reveal my findings in the form of themes that were present across multiple interviews. In Chapter V, I conclude by sharing implications for future practice.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Hanushek (2009) addresses the problem of poor performing teachers: “The bottom end of the teaching force is harming students. Allowing ineffective teachers to remain in the classroom is dragging down the nation” (p. 165). Teacher quality variables have been examined in past research to help determine impacts that teachers have on student learning. Previous research has shown a link between teacher quality and learning but has not pinpointed exact characteristics or qualifications that lead to gains in student achievement. Among those variables linked to student achievement are student demographics, standards-based teacher evaluation, certification, licensure, and teacher characteristics (e.g., verbal ability, classroom management skills, interpersonal skills). Some of the predominant variables examined within the literature are certification (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002), standards-based evaluation (Borman & Kimball, 2005), teacher qualifications (Adamson et al., 2003), teacher preparation (Heck, 2007), and teacher characteristics (Borman & Kimball, 2005). Understanding how teacher quality impacts student achievement in America’s schools is essential to improving learning for all students.

#### **The Need for Quality Teachers**

We all want excellent teachers for our children. This establishes a continuous need for quality teachers in our school buildings. Teacher quality is important to many

people. “Most policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and parents put teacher quality at the top of the agenda when they talk about improving education and raising student achievement” (Perkins-Gough, 2002, p. 85). The teacher evaluation instrument implemented in North Carolina has been designed to elicit stronger, more excellent teaching from our educators by incorporating the opportunity for the school leader to coach individual teachers. This tool will not work if school administrators are not honest with teachers about what they are seeing in their classrooms. Many studies, including one done by the Educational Testing Service (2002), *A National Priority: Americans Speak on Teacher Quality*, have determined that there is a strong link between teaching excellence and student achievement (Perkins-Gough, 2002). A study by economists at Harvard and Columbia tells us that the value added by a quality teacher greatly impacts the long-term success of students. They also concluded that good teachers create substantial economic value (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2012).

The problem facing American education is that schools are less effective at graduating students who are college ready (Murnane & Steele, 2007). When they initiated their Schools Under Registration Review process, which identified low performing schools, the New York State Education Department asserted “that responsibility for student achievement lies with the school” (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001, p. 199). This means that money, class size, teacher quality, and other resources really do make a difference in the learning of our students. It also means that economic status and home life, which are typically blamed for student underachievement, can be overcome with the right teachers. The school’s biggest potential however, to affect student

achievement lies in its teacher quality. Darling-Hammond (1997a) notes that levels of student achievement in a school are contingent upon the quality of teachers it employs. Teacher quality is the key to any school improvement strategy. Highly effective teaching does not just happen. It is the result of continual growth. The degree in which an educator grows and continues to grow is largely up to them. If the U.S. goal is to lead the world in college completion by the year 2020 (SAS, 2012), schools must ensure that all students receive the best educational experiences possible.

### **Theories of Teacher Quality**

The vision of the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is that every child deserves effective teachers. In a December 2015 press release, the NCTQ noted that the majority of states now recognize that evaluations of teacher effectiveness can help inform layoffs and teacher dismissals.

Twenty-eight states now articulate that ineffective teaching is grounds for teacher dismissal. This is not only a majority of the states, but a large shift in state policy since 2009 when only 11 states specified that teachers with multiple unsatisfactory evaluations should be eligible for dismissal. (Glaser, 2015, p. 2)

It goes on to share that nineteen states require performance to be considered when making layoff decisions and that 22 states prevent seniority from being the sole factor when reduction in force cutbacks must be made.

Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that the interest in teacher effectiveness is long overdue and of vast importance. Sanders and Horn (1998) suggest that students who are assigned to ineffective teachers continue to show the effects of such teachers even when these students are assigned to a very effective teacher in subsequent years. Others

have shared ideas about removing barriers to teaching and then firing those that prove to be ineffective; she offers a prescription that is designed to protect the students. It is often the students at the low income, high minority schools that suffer the most as they are at hard to staff facilities. She argues that a simple solution of easy hiring and firing does not address the concern of developing widespread teaching competence. This leaves little room for a guarantee that quality teaching will soon follow. “Although researchers have extensive and growing knowledge about how people learn and how to teach them effectively, such knowledge is useless for improving practice unless it gets in the hands and minds of teachers and administrators who need to use it” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 195).

Previous research found that teacher effectiveness is a strong determinant of differences in student learning (Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequence (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Heck’s (2009) study set out to show how increasing teacher effectiveness is central to improving student outcomes. He found that the effectiveness of teachers was related to student achievement in both reading and math which is consistent with previous students that have shown that differences in teacher effectiveness may explain student achievement.

### **Potential Effects and Reason for Action**

To make this concern of having ineffective teachers in our classrooms even more pressing, researchers have found that the impact of high-quality teaching can explain a full grade level of academic achievement (Borman & Kimball, 2005). If high quality teaching is related to greater achievement for all students, then it will result in more equitable outcomes for students from all backgrounds and serve as the mechanism by which districts can work to close the achievement gap. Teacher quality makes a difference. Since a teacher's effects across grade levels are cumulative, it stands to reason that a string of effective or ineffective teachers may put a student far ahead or far behind, respectively, over time (Palardy & Rumberger, 2008). How does this play out for a student who has several ineffective teachers in a row? It could potentially put that student possibly several years behind. North Carolina's newest state superintendent, Mark Johnson, reiterates this concern in his platform on urgency shared shortly after taking charge. He says, "Every day that we don't take bold actions for our students is a day that our students lose" (Hinchcliffe, 2017, p. 4). This knowledge indicates that teachers play one of the most vital roles in student learning. Educational reforms have encouraged research efforts that examine the link between teaching and learning, and research in teacher education has found links between teacher qualifications and student achievement (Adamson et al., 2003). Although specific behaviors that are associated with high quality teachers have not been fully explored, their collective impact on student learning and student achievement is substantial (Kaplan & Owings, 2001).

The primary research-based measure of quality teaching is a teachers' influence on the achievement gains of students in the classroom. The factors comprise high quality teaching and that eventually lead to those gains have been debated however. Research shows that subject specific content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, teachers' verbal ability, a diverse repertoire of classroom strategies, and teachers' character and attitude have all been studied and linked to teacher quality (Education Commission of the United States, 2008).

### **Effective vs. Ineffective . . . What's the Difference?**

It is unrealistic to assume that everyone agrees on how to identify an effective teacher (Murnane & Steele, 2007). What qualities really make a difference in the classroom? Expert content area knowledge? Classroom management skills? Understanding of children's development? Excellent communication abilities? A warm, caring personality? Knowledge of pedagogical methods and strategies? Classroom experience? A master's degree? Do the same qualities make a difference in every classroom? We can agree that all of these qualities are good in a classroom, but do they really directly impact student achievement and foster student growth?

“New York City reports school-level data on teacher certification, high education degrees of teachers, years of teacher experience, and teacher attendance—data that we used as initial indicators of teacher quality” (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001, p. 202), which is similar to the data that North Carolina reports to the public on their school report cards. Berliner and Scherer (2001) classify effective teachers as expert teachers who are better at capturing teachable moments, they know what is going on in the classroom at all times,



they are much better at impromptu responses, and they know how to get the class from Point A to Point B. Stronge et al. (2004) have defined many of the qualities of effective teachers, which they highlight in their handbook. Many of the same qualities are mentioned in addition to: monitoring student progress and potential, expecting and getting the best from our students, and organizing for instruction. There are others who are doing research who say things like having a master's degree or years of experience or any other teaching characteristic for that matter does not have much to do with how effective a teacher is at raising student test scores (Walker, 2008).

Incompetence has been loosely defined as a lack of relevant content knowledge or necessary skills in key areas such as instruction and classroom management (Tucker, 2001). "The term is legally defined as 'lack of ability, legal qualifications, or fitness to discharge the required duty'" (Thomas, 2009, p. 413). Mawdsley and Cumming (2008) referred to ineffective teachers and teaching as educational malpractice. Medical malpractice is when a physician omits or commits any act during the treatment of a patient that deviates from the accepted norms of practice and causes injury to the patient. Mawdsley and Cummings raise the question as to whether schools and teachers have the legal responsibility for any damages in the classroom where ineffective teaching took place. They also ask if there should be a comparable standard created just as there is one for doctors and lawyers. If we hold physicians responsible for their malpractice, why are we not holding educators to the same degree of expected professionalism?

In this study, I will be using the understanding that incompetence and ineffective teachers and teaching are interchangeable and characterized as those teachers whose

students are not growing academically and have poor ratings on their evaluations. Growing academically may be measured by common assessments, district or state mandated assessments, or standards-based report cards in addition to classroom teacher observations conducted by the school's administration. Poor ratings on their evaluations and/or walk-throughs will be documented throughout the course of the year by multiple observers.

### **Teacher Quality Studies**

The study done by Ascher and Fruchter showed a strong relationship between teacher quality indicators and student performance for "every measure at the elementary school level, and for most measures at the middle school level" (Ascher & Fruchter, 2001, p. 204). The lower the indicators were of teacher quality at the school level, the lower the school level student performance was. They also found that the performance of students increased significantly when math and science teachers had the strong academic backgrounds in the subjects that they taught. Many studies have sought to determine what factors contribute to high quality teaching, and the findings suggest that preparation and certification are essential elements of increased student learning (Heck, 2007). Teacher qualifications, such as certification, licensure, background, and verbal ability, also contribute, to student achievement outcomes (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). Achievement is increased when students receive instruction from certified teachers with pedagogical training (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003).

It may be argued that the only true measure of quality teaching is the impact that teachers have on the achievement of students; however numerous teacher characteristics

have been studied with regard to teacher quality. Subject specific content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, teachers' verbal ability, diverse repertoire of classroom strategies, and teachers' character and attitude have all been studied with regard to teacher quality (Education Commission of the United States, 2008). Teachers' accumulated credit hours, grade point average, and certification have also impacted classroom effectiveness as viewed by supervisors. In more recent years, the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) and the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) have developed teaching standards to help ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn from highly qualified teachers (INTASC, 2011; NBPTS, 2008). Teacher quality does matter, but research has yet to determine specific factors comprising teacher quality that impact student achievement gains on accountability measures. Current teacher quality literature indicates that researchers and policymakers have attempted to determine the relationship between teacher quality and student achievement (King Rice, 2003).

Research has revealed that teachers are the number one predictor of student achievement (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). More specifically, teacher performance is responsible "for at least 7% of total variation in student achievement" (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002, p. 12). For this reason, many recent educational studies have focused on teacher quality—what it looks like or is, how it is measured, and those facets that most directly impact student learning gains. Teacher quality affects students' learning since it influences what teachers know and do in their classrooms; therefore, pre-service learning may be an indicator of teacher quality. As the educational profession continuously asks

teachers to become more effective and efficient in their teaching, improving teacher quality begins with teacher preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Elliott, 1996, 1997; Scherer, 2001).

Research has determined that teacher quality does matter, but the research has yet to definitively determine the specific aspects of teacher quality that directly shape student learning and performance on measures of accountability. Research studies have identified the teacher as the single most important school-related input to improve student achievement (Cawelti, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997b; Jordan et al., 1997; Kaplan & Owings, 2001; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright et al., 1997).

Education coursework matters as a predicative measure of teacher effectiveness (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003). Not only are teacher degrees significantly related to student achievement, but preparatory coursework is also a strong predictor of instructional effectiveness (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). This plays out in our schools when traditionally licensed teachers are compared to lateral entry teachers. There is just something about the pedagogical preparation that gives traditionally licensed teachers an edge and a confidence over lateral entry teachers. Several different studies, taking place over the course of 15 years, found a positive relationship between teachers' education coursework and subsequent student achievement (Adamson et al., 2003). The positive effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement may even be greater than the influence of student background characteristics such as poverty, language background, and minority status (Adamson et al., 2003).

Research has identified one major concern that is born of the inconsistency in teacher distribution—schools that experience a decline in teacher quality also experience a decline in student achievement over time (Heck, 2007). High quality teachers may want to teach in high quality schools, which allows the achievement gap between students in higher achieving versus lower achieving schools to continue to widen. This has even more significance if we also think about the research that shows that high quality instruction can raise students' cumulative gains in achievement over time (Haskins & Loeb, 2007). Results from Dee and Wyckoff's study on incentives and teacher performance (2015) indicate that dismissal threats from administrators increased the voluntary attrition of low-performing teachers by 11 percentage points (i.e., more than 50 percent) and improved the performance of teachers who remained.

There is a gap in the literature for more recent studies on teacher quality. During the 2000's, the focus of our nation was on teacher quality, but have now entered into a time period where the teacher shortage is the conversation. Now, we just need teachers. Principals are now wrestling with the idea of keeping the devil they've got in the classroom vs. the one they do not know. The one that is already in the classroom can potentially be coached and have positive impacts on students. If you get rid of this teacher, will there be someone else to fill in this gap? In addition, teacher tenure laws have been repealed and/or severely weakened since 2008 which has taken attention away from teacher quality.

### **The Role of the School Leader**

At the school level, the principal works as the instructional leader to facilitate effective instruction and maximize student achievement (O'Donnell & White, 2005). In this era of standards-based reform, educational leaders must embrace learning for all students and provide equitable educational opportunities for all students (Hodgkinson, 1991). Educational leaders must cultivate a shared vision of success for all students within their school cultures and work to establish consensus, implement the necessary structures to change the process of teaching and learning, and assist all children to reach mandated levels of proficiency (Newstead, Saxton, & Colby, 2008). They must have a greater understanding of how the instructional practices of high-quality teachers affect student achievement gains which can then inform their interviewing and hiring practices.

The principal's role, for example, has evolved from that of manager to instructional leader—where leader is defined as change agent, facilitator, and consensus builder. Educational leaders must understand the goals of education in the 21st century and act collaboratively in order to develop a shared vision within the school and successfully lead the communities they serve. Leaders must understand the importance of accountability measures in the current educational climate, the effects of teacher quality on student achievement, and how leaders can encourage the continuing development of high-quality faculty to support student learning and successful outcomes. Educational leaders within 21st century schools must focus on the most important aspect of the schooling process—high quality instruction (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). They must provide opportunities for collaboration and

planning to occur, time to review assessment data which informs instructional practices, and consistently share timely and effective feedback with teachers about their classroom instruction. After facilitating the necessary components of effective schools, educational leaders must establish learning communities where the expertise of all members of the faculty are maximized to support the school's mission.

Principals play a vital role in establishing direction for successful schools by influencing student learning (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). It is through their leadership that norms and expectations are set for classroom instruction. Principals who are visible in the classrooms, active in collaboration centered about planning and assessment, and who challenge their staff to reach even the reluctant learner set the tone for quality instruction at their schools. Principals contribute indirectly to learning and teaching (Davis et al., 2005; Waters et al., 2003) and by attracting, selecting, and retaining high quality teachers. The primary role of the principal is that of the instructional leader and to ensure and maintain the learning for all students.

“In her essay ‘Bad Apples,’ Kate Cambor (1999) emphasizes the strong role that administrators can play to intervene early, to help those teachers who can be helped, and to eliminate those teachers who are continually ineffective” (Tell, 2000, p. 3). Good teachers make good schools, and the most important factor that can affect student learning is quality teaching. Paying closer attention to teaching practices and their effects on student learning has become standard practice in an effort to improve the quality of

both teaching and learning. No one wants to see an unsuccessful teacher remain in the classroom. Administrators can either help teachers improve or work to remove them from the classroom. One element of the improvement process is capacity building—the development of all people who serve the school, both within its walls and in the community (Fullan, 2000; Schmoker, 1999). Marginally performing teachers will test our commitment to improvement and administrators face the challenge of ensuring high standards for all, while offering additional levels of assistance to individual teachers to help them meet those high expectations (Tucker, 2001). Like all professionals, teachers need to be supported, challenged, and held accountable.

### **Teacher Evaluations**

The purpose of a teacher evaluation should always be to improve instruction. Teacher evaluations should improve student learning in the classroom by analyzing what students are learning as well as integrating the teacher observation. A review of the literature indicates a gap in the evaluation system for growing our teachers. It could be that the instruments used in these evaluation systems are failing to measure quality teaching in terms of what directly impacts student achievement gains (Kennedy, 2007; Knoepfel & Blake, 2007). “The need to rework teacher effectiveness measures is exacerbated by the fact that learning and achievement are not where we want them to be” (Marshall, 2016, p. 2). J. C. Marshall roots his claim in the individual state department of education’s data from 2012 to 2014. Multiple states were shared including Colorado, New York, and Pennsylvania. Most of the teacher evaluation tools are rooted in the foundations of teaching and learning—the planning, the classroom management, and the



analyzation of data. It is much more difficult to measure meaningful discourse in the classroom or the effective use of differentiation. We can easily note that we viewed it happened, but how do we really know what it meant for students?

The team at the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) set out to fine tune teacher evaluation systems. Their tentative conclusion is that each evaluation should include three factors—classroom observations, student achievement gains, and feedback from students (Marshall, 2012). This idea of using multiple pieces of evidence to get the overall picture of what the teacher is doing on a daily basis is not the common practice. Sometimes just using one instrument or one artifact limits perspectives on what the teacher is responsible for. “The use of the multiple measures is meant to compensate for the imperfections of each individual measure and produce more accurate and helpful evaluations” (Marshall, 2012, p. 50).

Charlotte Danielson shared (Griffin, 2013) that her framework to evaluate teacher effectiveness needed two approaches. First, look at the work of the teacher—how well do they do the work of teaching? Secondly, look at the results that teachers get with students—how well do their students learn? These suggestions make sense and will improve education *if* they are used wisely. Day to day teaching practices are what drive student achievement—which is not always what is observed during a classroom evaluation. K. Marshall suggests that a better approach would be to have ten brief unannounced observations that are between 10 and 15 minutes in length by the same administrator. Danielson also suggested the need for frequent, unannounced and brief

observations. These multiple visits would allow the observer to see various parts of the school day and the teacher's work as well as get a true pulse on the teacher's teaching.

When looking at student achievement data as a means for evaluating classroom teachers, Marshall (2012) tells us that it would be "highly problematic to use standardized test scores to evaluate teachers" (p. 52). This one assessment shows us how students performed on one day or over multiple days depending on the assessment. Instead, we should be looking at students' achievement data throughout the school year—common assessments, district benchmark assessments, and those standardized tests to make informed decisions about a teacher's impact on the achievement of a group of students. Assessments that allow for a baseline of results and then have a plan implemented to progress monitor before re-assessing would be ideal because the principal would be able to see the direct impact that a specific teacher had on a student.

If teacher evaluations are to determine the effectiveness of a classroom teacher, we must think differently about the implementation of these evaluations. Is it our goal to catch teachers doing something wrong or are they an opportunity to provide timely, effective feedback to our teachers in the hopes that they will dramatically transform teaching and learning? As administrators analyze a teacher's performance, Iwanicki (2001) suggests that we ask three simple questions:

1. Were the objectives of the lesson worthwhile and challenging?
2. Did the teacher treat the students with dignity and respect?
3. To what extent did all students achieve the objectives of the lesson?

The final question addresses students learning, which is the dominant test of effective instruction. When administrators look at teaching on the basis of student learning, they must consider: what students need to know and be able to do, what the teacher can do to foster that learning, and ask how successful was the teacher in achieving the desired student outcomes. “Teacher evaluation is productive because it results in recommendations that enhance the quality of teaching and student learning in the classroom” (Iwanicki, 2001, p. 58).

“Beyond the purposes of faculty improvement and remediation, results of evaluations may be used in a variety of employment decisions including retention, tenure, dismissal, promotion, salary, reassignment, and reduction in force” (Thomas et al., 2009). Classroom walk-throughs and observations are the principal’s first insight into what is happening on a daily basis instructionally in a classroom. In addition to these small moments in time that are captured during an evaluation, principals as instructional leaders should also be integral members of a team of teachers who analyze data and make plans for moving forward with enrichment and remediation with students.

Through all of these observations and evaluations of a teacher’s practice, a principal will make personnel decisions. This process can lead one to believe that there could be a question of procedural fairness arising. A principal must be certain that adequate evidence was collected to support staffing decisions and that all evaluations were conducted in a consistent manner.

Several principles emerge from case law to guide educators in developing equitable systems: standards for assessing teacher adequacy must be defined and communicated to teachers; criteria must be applied uniformly and consistently; an

opportunity and direction for improvement must be provided; and procedures specified in state laws and school board policies must be followed. (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 293)

### **What Does the Law State?**

Once someone receives a teaching certificate and/or a teaching license, *Public School Law* (2009) reminds us that this only means that the teacher has satisfied the minimum state requirements but that no absolute rights exist to acquire a teaching position. This tells us that no one is entitled or guaranteed employment in the state simply because they are qualified to be in that position. Career status and teacher tenure are traditionally two terms that educators will voice when the topic of teacher dismissal is being discussed. “Tenure contracts are created through the state legislative action, ensure teachers that employment will be terminated only for adequate cause and that procedural due process will be provided” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 285). Tenure is a statutory right that employees can earn which ensure that any potential dismissal is based on adequate cause and accompanied by procedural due process. Tenure contracts only provide a certain amount of job security—they do not specify that one will teach in a particular school, grade or content area, nor do they guarantee permanent employment. Most tenure contracts guarantee a teacher a teaching position in this specific school district. Tenure Law, North Carolina General (G.S.) 115C-325(a)(6) defines a teacher as one who is a; classroom teacher and instructional support personnel, who has a standard provisional or vocational license, and who is employed to fill a full time, permanent position. The teacher tenure law was updated in North Carolina to reflect a loss of tenure to all staff members effective in 2018. This means that all teachers will career status lost the career

status employment protections a little over a year ago. From that time, local school boards will determine whether or not to offer these teachers 1-, 2-, or 4-year contracts largely at the discretion of the local school board. At the end of each contract, a teacher can be let go at the discretion of the local board, without any right to a hearing. Can ineffective teachers be fired under the career status law? Yes! The framework intentionally establishes many opportunities for teachers to improve or leave teaching. Early stages provide for disciplinary action and action plans. As the process progresses, there are numerous opportunities for teachers to improve or leave their position.

“Except for certain limitations imposed by constitutional provisions and federal civil rights laws, state statutes govern educators’ employment” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 304). NC G.S. 115C-325 references the system of employment for all public school teachers. In the past, when a teacher has been employed by a North Carolina public school system for four consecutive years, the board, near the end of the fourth year, could vote upon whether to grant the teacher career status.

G.S.115C-325(e) gives us information on grounds for dismissal or demotion of a career employee. The first piece of information that administrators must be aware of is that no employee shall be dismissed except for one or more of the following reasons—and inadequate performance is one of these 15 options. The general statute specifically states that:

**Inadequate Performance**—In determining whether the professional performance of a career employee is adequate, consideration shall be given to regular and special evaluation reports prepared in accordance with the published policy of the employing local school administrative unit and to any published standards of performance which shall have been adopted by the board. Failure to notify a

career employee of an inadequacy or deficiency in performance shall be conclusive evidence of satisfactory performance. Inadequate performance for a teacher shall mean (i) the failure to perform at a proficient level on any standard of the evaluation instrument or (ii) otherwise performing in a manner that is below standard. However, for a probationary teacher, a performance rating below proficient may or may not be deemed adequate at that stage of development by a superintendent or designee. For a career teacher, a performance rating below proficient shall constitute inadequate performance unless the principal noted on the instrument that the teacher is making adequate progress toward proficiency given the circumstances.

In *Tippecanoe Education Association v. Tippecanoe School Corporation* (1998), precedent was set for dismissing a teacher for inadequate performance. In this particular case, a teacher named Sarah Spencer filed a grievance against her non-renewal because her administrator failed to cite specific performance behaviors on her two evaluation forms during the school year. Ms. Spencer was not given reasons for her non-renewal from her administrator or from her superintendent. In the statement of the court's reasoning we find that

Contrary to the requirement to identify specific behaviors, the evaluations here at issue set forth only the evaluator's generalized conclusions, leaving the teacher to speculate as to what behavior led to the conclusions and as to what they could do to correct the situation. (*Tippecanoe Education Association v. Tippecanoe School Corporation*, 1998)

This case and G.S.115C-325(e) align with the need and expectation to inform an employee of any inadequacies—failure to do so will result in conclusive evidence of communicating satisfactory performance. There is an explicit need to ensure that all employees in jeopardy of being non-renewed or dismissed are clear in their

understanding of what needs to improve and what steps they can take to improve. This information should be clearly documented in its communication to the employee.

### **Plans for Improvement**

One specific remediation strategy is to create a plan for improvement. Few principals take advantage of these because they require time and effort to implement (McGrath, 2000). “Providing opportunities and support for a teacher to achieve expected performance standards can be an important component in substantiating that a teacher had adequate notice of deficiencies” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 414). These plans of actions offer a potential bridge between the high demands and expectations of high-quality instruction and the reality of a poor performing educator by identifying problems and providing much needed support for this hopefully capable teacher. Administrators have an ethical obligation to put a plan in place because a successful remediation affects multiple people and whole school improvement will not happen unless everyone performs well. “Every administrator committed to take his or her school to the next level of excellence should provide assistance to struggling teachers” (Tucker, 2001, p. 53).

School boards expect all professionally licensed employees to maintain high levels of performance. If an employee does not meet the standard, the superintendent and the administrative staff shall address any identified performance or deficiencies through appropriate means, including placing the employee on a monitored growth, directed growth, or mandatory improvement plan when mandated and required by state law. Plans created should work to improve the learning in the classroom, and this is done by maximizing the performance of the classroom teacher through intentional, effective

instructional improvements. Strategies that move classroom teachers beyond the generalness of the skill to transformative actions that when proficiently implemented by the teacher can move them beyond delivering learning experiences that are ineffective to experiences that are highly engaging, purposeful and thoughtful. “Improving the intentionality of teaching can result in higher achievement and increased growth for all students” (J. C. Marshall, 2016, p. x). Plans should be developed as valuable tools designed to promote the professional development of licensed employees. The potential to yield substantial results which benefit all concerned parties, especially the students, should be what drives each administrator to put forth the time and energy needed to support these marginally performing teachers.

### **Dismissal Process**

“State laws delineate the authority of school boards in terminating school personnel. Generally, these laws specify the causes for which a teacher may be terminated and the procedures that must be followed” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 393). Courts have previously declared in multiple cases that school boards have the right to determine the fitness of a teacher and have a duty to make those recommendations. According to the United States Supreme Court:

A teacher works in a sensitive area in a schoolroom. There he shapes the attitude of young minds towards the society in which they live. In this, the state has a vital concern. It must preserve the integrity of the schools. That the school authorities have *the right and the duty to screen* the officials, teachers, and employees as to their fitness to maintain the integrity of the schools as a part of ordered society, cannot be doubted. (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 393)



The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees that no state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. Basic due process rights are that include both judicial proceedings and governmental agencies, including the school boards. “Courts have established that a teacher’s interest in public employment may entail significant ‘property’ and ‘liberty’ rights necessitating due process prior to employment termination” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 394). The contract or tenure that an employee may have conveys just that—property rights for that teacher. This does not mean that the individual cannot be terminated, just that the requirements of due process and the ability to show just cause for this termination must be presented. If these protected liberties or property interests are implicated, the 14th amendment entitles+ the teacher to at least be given notice of the explicit reasons for the school board’s recommendation and/or actions and be given the opportunity for a hearing.

“The *Roth* and *Sindermann* cases are the legal precedents for assessing the procedural rights of non-tenured teachers” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 399). In short, these two cases in the Supreme Court held that non-tenured teachers did not have constitutionally protected property rights to employment that required due process before a non-renewal of their contract. They do not have a property claim of reappointment. Beyond these basic constitutional requirements of appropriate notice and an opportunity to be heard, both state law and local school boards have very detailed procedures that must be followed.

Employment terminations are classified as either dismissals or non-renewals. The term dismissal refers to the termination for just cause of any tenured or non-tenured

(probationary) teacher within the contract period. A non-renewal refers to the contract not being reinstated at the end of a contract period. A critical component of dismissal actions must be showing justifiable cause for this termination of employment. NC G.S. 115C-325(e) list the grounds for dismissal after telling us that no career employee can be dismissed except for one or more of the following:

1. Inadequate performance
2. Immorality
3. Insubordination
4. Neglect of Duty
5. Physical or mental incapacity
6. Habitual or excessive use of alcohol or nonmedical use of a controlled substance as defined in Article 5 of Chapter 90 of the General Statutes.
7. Conviction of a felony or a crime involving moral turpitude.
8. Advocating the overthrow of the government of the United States or of the State of North Carolina by force, violence, or other unlawful means.
9. Failure to fulfill the duties and responsibilities imposed upon teachers or school administrators by the General Statutes of
10. use which constitutes grounds for the revocation of the career teacher's teaching license or the career school administrator's administrator license.
11. A justifiable decrease in the number of positives due to district reorganization, decreased enrollment, or decreased funding, provided that there is compliance with subdivision.
12. Failure to maintain his or her license in a current status
13. Failure to repay money owed to the State in accordance with the provisions of article 60, Chapter 143 of the General Statutes.
14. Providing false information or knowingly omitting a material fact on an application for employment or in response to a pre-employment inquiry.

In order to make the determination of inadequate performance as the grounds for dismissal, an administrator would need to give special consideration to the evaluations prepared during the school year and ensure that they align with district board policy in regards to published standards of performance. The career employee must be notified in writing of any inadequacies or deficiencies. Failure to do so would result in conclusive

evidence of satisfactory performance for the employee. The lesson here for administrators is to constantly document what they see, noting concerns, and making recommendations for improvement. “Under teacher tenure laws, the burden of proof is placed on the school board to show cause for dismissal” (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 411). If inadequate performance is a thought when continued employment is discussed, written documentation must support the recommendation and/or decision—by establishing a preponderance of evidence. Our G.S.155C-325(e)(3) states that “Inadequate performance for a teacher shall mean (i) the failure to perform at a proficient level on any standard of the evaluation instrument or (ii) otherwise performing in a manner that is below standard.”

The NC general statute indicates that as administrators, make the recommendation to the Superintendent and school board based on the evidence that has been collected, documented, and made available to the employee. An employee cannot be dismissed except upon the superintendent’s recommendation. There are specific procedures and a process that must be followed for the dismissal of a career employee. The superintendent makes the actual recommendation to the school board of the dismissal of the career employee. The superintendent then has a few steps that they will need to follow before officially submitting the recommendation to the school board which include

1. Provide written notice to the career employee about his or her intention to make such a recommendation and the grounds for which he or she believes such dismissal is justified.

2. Meet with the career employee and provide written notice of the charges, an explanation of the charges, and provide an opportunity for the career employee to respond.
3. 14 days will be granted to the career employee where they are able to request a review by an impartial hearing officer appointed by the Superintendent of Public Instruction.
4. If the career employee does not request a hearing before a hearing officer within the 14 days provided, the superintendent may then submit his or her recommendation to the school board. The Board of Education issues the final decision.

The non-renewal of teacher contracts is similar to current practice for non-renewal of probationary teachers. At the end of the contract period, employment can be terminated for any or no reason, as long as the reason is not constitutionally impermissible (e.g., denial of protected speech) and satisfies state law. If the superintendent does not intend to recommend renewal, then s/he must notify the teacher in writing by June 1 in North Carolina. NC Boards of Education must give non-renewal notice by June 15. Non-renewal decisions may not be arbitrary, capricious, discriminatory, for personal or political reasons, or for any reason prohibited by State or federal law.

### **Dismissal Statistics**

One way to address classroom performance issues is to increase staff development opportunities for teachers to improve their skills. Another way to increase

student performance is to remove poor teachers from the classroom. However, current research indicates that relatively few teachers are being dismissed for poor performance.

“Despite conservative estimates that 5 percent of teachers are incompetent, the termination rate—which includes resignations, dismissals or tenured teachers, and non-renewals of probationary teachers—is less than 1 percent” (Tucker, 2001, p. 52).

Nationally, in 1991, the average annual proportion of teachers dismissed or persuaded to resign was 0.64% with most of those teachers being probationary. Michael Ward (1995) reported that the dismissal rate for probationary teachers in Pennsylvania was 2.7%, while the rate for tenured teachers was 0.15%, or 1 out of every 670 tenured teachers. While probationary teachers made up 21% of the total teacher population in Ward’s study, they accounted for 81% of the dismissals. Conversely, tenured teachers, who made up 79% of the total teacher population, accounted for only 19% of the dismissals (Ward, 1995). According to Ward, the actual rate of dismissals for tenured teachers (0.15%) was significantly lower than the proportion of such teachers that superintendents believe should be dismissed for poor performance (4.1%). Administrators are only removing roughly one of every 27 tenured teachers they believe should be dismissed (Ward, 1995). According to information from the Illinois State Board of Education dating back to 1987, 93% of Illinois school districts have never attempted to fire anyone with tenure. Indeed, data collected since 1998 from each of Illinois’s 876 school districts demonstrates that 83% of the state’s school districts have not given any tenured teacher an unsatisfactory job evaluation. In the 2016-2017 Report to the NCGA, it was reported

that 21 teachers were dismissed which is roughly 0.3% of all teacher attrition that school year.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates what a principal is expected to monitor and be responsible for as they initiate action plans and make a recommendation for dismissal. A logical and sequential process would include the beginning red flags which are immediately met with a conversation with the principal and suggestions are made for improvement. After further classroom observations and evidence of ineffectiveness, the principal then meets with the teacher again to present the action plan which is intended to help the teacher grow and improve. A date is set for review between the teacher and the principal. The principal continues to document what they are observing in the classroom and collecting artifacts that represent either a teacher that is improving or that is showing no change or not enough change. The next conversation that the principal has is to determine whether improvement has been made or whether we need to move for the recommendation for dismissal. All the while, the principals are balancing the work load of running a successful school, meeting with other teachers, parents, and students. Life does not happen as neatly and cleanly as this logical progression shows, and my interviews dug deeper into how this actually occurs. How do they make it all work? How much time are they devoting to helping this teacher improve? What other people are involved and taken away from their school duties to help this teacher? What support is being given to the students?

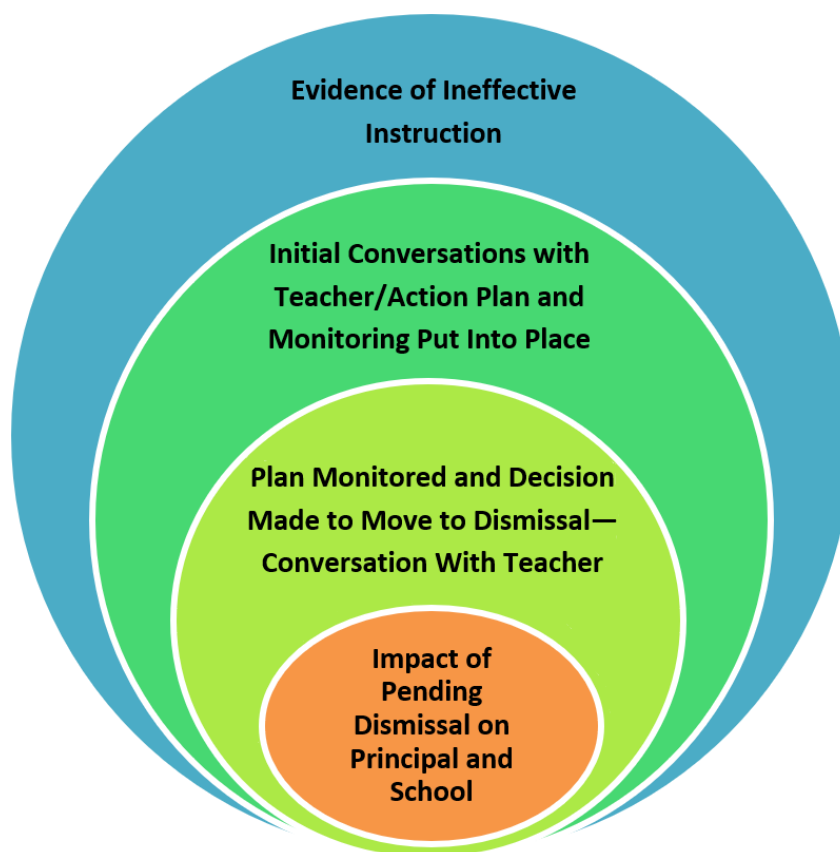


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

### Summary

The influence of teacher quality on student achievement is an area of educational research that directly impacts the effectiveness of America's schools. Understanding the characteristics that lead to high quality teaching will allow researchers and educators to ensure that student learning gains are continuously improved each school year. Darling-Hammond and Borman and Kimball all gave evidence of the negative impacts that an ineffective teacher has on a child's academic growth—a full level of academic achievement lost. Research has also revealed that teachers are the number one predictor of student achievement (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). The principal's role is to be the

instructional leader in the school building and to both ensure and maintain the learning for all students. Even though the world may believe that we cannot get rid of a poor teacher, the law is on our side—G.S. 115C-325(e) gives us the information needed to show grounds for dismissal or demotion of a career employee. “As noted in the report of the National Commission on Teacher & America’s Future, ‘A caring, competent, and qualified teacher for every child is the most important ingredient in education reform and, we believe, the most frequently overlooked’” (Tucker & Stronge, 2005, p. 47).



### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this research was to study the effects of dismissing an ineffective teacher with specific attention focused on the principal and on the school staff. I chose to interview others because like Seidman said, “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories” (Seidman, 2013, p. 1). He goes on to share that interviewing is a basic mode of inquiry (Seidman, 2013). The focused interviews were centered around how they were affected professionally, personally, and politically. Each individual participated in three interviews for approximately one hour each, which resulted in three hours of interview time per participant for a total of at least 30 hours of interview time. Two of my participants easily talked and shared beyond the expected one hour of time for each interview.

When an ineffective teacher is referenced in this study, we are not looking at cases of inappropriate behavior that may involve law enforcement and criminal charges but rather strictly at those teachers who are ineffective in showing academic growth in their students. S/he may do everything else right—paperwork, meeting deadlines, supervising the hallways, responding to parent concerns, etc. It is those cases where classroom performance that has led their administrator to believe that it is time to do something different on which we want to focus. The primary objectives were to understand what factors led the principal to believe that the teacher was ineffective with

students, what processes were put into place to help the teacher grow and improve, and how long it was before the focus changed from improvement to dismissal. What supporting evidence did the principal use in making the decision that the teacher should be dismissed and how did the actual dismissal occur? How did the teacher's dismissal and reaction to it impact the principal and the school? Qualitative methods provided the basis for this investigation. "Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to the underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 1). Specifically, I used focused interviews and document analysis to examine the impact of teacher dismissal actions on the principal and the school.

I studied participants through individual interviews in an effort to gain a better understanding of how the teacher dismissals impacted principals and their schools. This study was needed because we know ineffective teachers exist, yet many remain in the classrooms year after year. Many principals will indicate that the reason is that there are too many barriers and too much red tape in dismissing a teacher. This study will provide multiple stories about how principals identify, manage, and recommend dismissal for an ineffective teacher.

Any identifying information about the principals in this study resides in a locked filing cabinet. Pseudonyms were used throughout the data analysis and the presentation of the findings. No sensitive personal information was collected during these interviews. Following the completion of this study, I plan to shred any documents, transcription of

interviews, and coding that may have identifiable data on it through the use of an industrial shredder. All consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years.

The study will investigate the following research questions:

1. How do principals determine the ineffectiveness of a teacher?
2. What action plan and thought process does the principal use to grow and improve a teacher is identified as ineffective?
3. How do principals come to the decision that a teacher should be dismissed?
4. How did this process affect the principal professionally, personally, and politically?
5. What effects does the dismissal process have on the principal's practice?
6. What effects on school climate, culture, and operations do principals describe?

### **Research Design**

This research gathered a collective set of personal stories that others can learn from through this investigation. Analyzing the stories helps other principals to learn more about the process with which a principal becomes entangled when moving to dismiss a classroom teacher. The goal is to provide a framework and a collection of experiences and to learn from current and past school administrators.

I worked across one Local Education Agency (LEA) with ten participants from this LEA. The reason I stayed local with this investigation is due to the sensitive nature that many may believe I am inquiring about. I believe that to really get these administrators to revisit these past experiences and to allow us to hear beyond what we already know, a trusting relationship must first be present. Trustworthiness was required

from both parties in these interviews; the principals and myself as the researcher. My colleagues and I are already trusting of one another. Although I did not plan to inquire the exact ages of our participants, I imagine that most are between the ages of 30 and 65 years of age. I am basing this on the understanding of the level of graduate schooling and experience that must take place before one can be licensed to be a sitting principal and on the average retirement age for most school administrators.

Five of the participants are sitting building level principals. The other five have all had recent promotions to Central Office as a director, but were principals for the period of time I was exploring. Six of the participants were female and four were male. Seven were Caucasian and three were African American.

One possible limitation in this study is that none of our principals actually had a teacher dismissed. Ben had one that the superintendent recommended to the school board for dismissal, but the teacher ultimately resigned. Our principals either saw their teachers resign and go to a different school system or another profession altogether, or they saw their teachers improve and ultimately were weaned off of their action plans over time.

Interviews, which will be defined as close personal interaction, with the ten total selected participants were designed to protect the confidentiality of teachers, staff, and schools affiliated with the research participants by using pseudonyms. Through three in-depth individual interviews with each principal, I was able to collect data and code for similarities and differences across principals. None of the questions used involved any level of deception. There was rare to no apparent risk associated with participating in this for psychological, social, economic, legal or physical effects on the subjects.

Data is shared in a narrative form that highlights significant events, timelines, and interactions from the qualitative research. In order to address any concerns about the confidentiality of the actual teacher involved in the dismissal and the sensitive personnel attributes, the name of the teacher was not used by the principal being interviewed at any time.

## **Data Collection**

### **Focused Interviews**

Three separate interviews were conducted with all ten principals who are all employed in one school district in the area. Each principal previously agreed to be a research participant signed a consent form. There was neither expected risk for participating in this research nor was there any incentive offered to the participants. Site approval for the school district in which I am basing my research was given. All interviews were recorded on a recording device with information about if this is Karen, Rebecca, etc., so that neither the transcribers of these interviews had awareness of personal information for my research subjects nor did my faculty advisors. I was the only person with the knowledge of the actual name of my participants. Although it was not the plan to review documents supporting this time we are learning about, some were made available with identifiable features removed, and we used those to guide some of our subsequent questioning.

Each interview lasted at least an hour. Initial interview questions all mirrored one another in the first interview. Interviews took place in a comfortable setting for the principal whether that was at their current school, my school, or in our Central Office

building. Subsequent interview questions aligned with one another along the themes of personal, professional, and political as well as individual follow up questions based on the responses provided (see Appendix A). The first interview focused on gathering general information about the dismissal of an ineffective teacher and putting a timeline of events together to represent the school year that the teacher was recommended for dismissal. The second and third interviews were utilized to capture more detailed narrative accounts of events on the days in which the decision for a needed action plan was made, the initial conversation with the teacher was held, further observations and teacher meetings occurred, and finally the conversation that let the teacher know that they were moving from improvement to dismissal as held. As we examined this lengthy process, we were able to see how the school administrator agonized over this decision, the conversations, and the students who assigned to this teacher.

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants were selected from one school system. This school system was chosen based on personal relationships with members of my professional network of colleagues (mainly UNCG classmates and current colleagues). I contacted possible research participants through e-mail or over the phone to explain the purpose of my study and initially get their consent to be a willing participant. To be considered as a potential participant, principals needed to meet the following inclusion/exclusion criteria:

- a current sitting principal or one who has served as a principal within the past 8 years, and

- as principal, the participant implemented an action plan on a certified teacher due to a lack of effectiveness on student growth.

My goal was to have a diversity of gender, ethnicity, experience, and school level representation in my group of principals. I believe this study will reflect the impact of dismissing a teacher from different principals. There was no exclusion based on race, gender, or ethnicity. Participant demographics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Demographics	Current Position
Principal A - Karen	African American female	Principal
Principal B - Rebecca	Caucasian female	Central Office Director
Principal C - James	African American male	Principal
Principal D - Stephen	Caucasian male	Central Office Director
Principal E - Grace	African American female	Central Office Director
Principal F - Ben	Caucasian male	Central Office Director
Principal G - Brittani	Caucasian female	Central Office Director
Principal H- Elena	Caucasian female	Principal
Principal I- Josh	Caucasian male	Principal
Principal J - Kay	Caucasian female	Principal

### Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber once completed.

Transcriptions were coded for common themes, connections, relationships, overlaps, and silences. I used colored highlighters, post-it notes, and a spreadsheet to organize these

themes, connections, relationships, overlaps, and silences as well as powerful quotes from each participant. Each post-it note included information on the participant's name, line in which the commonality is noted, and the commonality itself. Once each transcription was coded in this manner, data was reviewed and collected from these initial interviews to determine whether more information was needed from any of the research participants. This research is credible because of spreadsheet alignment. If additional information was determined a need, then follow up interview questions were drafted and interviews were scheduled. The qualitative software Dedoose was suggested to me by a colleague to use to organize my findings, but after some piddling with it, the more visual tactic of post-it notes and a spreadsheet method was easier to follow and to continue.

### **Conclusion**

My hope is that this study will be a tool for current and future school administrators to use if they find themselves with an ineffective teacher in their building. It is important for principals to network and dialogue with one another and to learn from one another's mistakes and/or successes. We need to take comfort in knowing that others have removed teachers from their schools and have lived to talk about it. Dismissals happen so infrequently that administrators do not have a model to follow from those who have gone before. We need to learn how to identify ineffectiveness in our schools, how to have those hard conversations, how to create a manageable action plan, how to determine whether to make the jump from improvement to dismissal, and how to balance all of those responsibilities and timelines, with the others from our daily routine.



The findings of this research will show the agony that principals felt as they revisited how this work affected them personally, professionally, and politically. Not a single principal interviewed took the proceedings lightly, nor did they rush through the process. It is imperative to note that each principal did not tackle this work alone—they included others so ensure that they were always on track with their thinking. This goes to show that this work mattered to them because in the end, it was about the children.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

The stories of how principals were affected during the process of working with an ineffective teacher yielded three themes:

- factors that affected principals professionally,
- personal challenges that principals struggled with, and
- political ramifications

These themes emerged through the analysis of the raw transcript data from the three interviews conducted with each of the ten participants. In each section each principal tells his/her own story of his/her work which was unanimously described as exhausting by all participants.

Principals are affected professionally as they work with ineffective teachers because it is their job as instructional leaders to ensure quality instruction is being delivered by all in their building. Principals are routinely evaluated on the student academic performance of their student body, and data is regularly reviewed to identify weaknesses. When those weaknesses have a name with them, a person who is responsible for delivering sound instruction, the principal is faced with how to improve this problem. Professionally, that can be difficult. It is not always easy to fix a problem one cannot control. When thinking about the sphere of influence, an individual can

influence the situation and hope that the results are good, but ultimately, that teacher is in control of the learning in their classroom.

Principals are affected personally during their work with ineffective teachers in their buildings. What happens when the ineffective teacher is more than a colleague, but is a close friend? A neighbor? What happens when the principal knows that there are underlying personal situations taking place in that teacher's life that are impacting their work? How does the principal hold onto the standard for sound instruction and also balance the desire to be understanding and a good friend? On the other hand, what happens when the principal simply just doesn't like this teacher? Is the principal willing to put in the work needed to help the teacher grow as an educator? Is the time still worth it?

Finally, a principal's work with an ineffective teacher can also affect him/her politically. If the teacher is a member of the community, that can easily turn a community against its school leader. If the teacher has connections to the local school board, that can turn up the heat on the school leader. If the principal makes a mistake along the way, could the principal's job then be in jeopardy?

The use of the focused interviews in this manner allowed for participants to relive the actions and emotions connected to their work with ineffective teachers in their buildings. The three themes provided a parallel context in which former and current principals could align their responses with. This exploration of principals' work with teachers allowed insight to better understand that the decisions made by principals surrounding an ineffective teacher are so much more than the public probably believes.

These principals agonized over their work and wrestled with their decisions far more than our initial limited understanding and far more than research suggests.

### **Factors that Affected the Principal Professionally**

All ten participants were asked to open their first interview by telling about a time they were concerned about the performances of a classroom teacher, what kinds of things stood out to them, and what kind of support they sought out for these teachers. Most shared that working with ineffective teachers was something that had happened several times to them over the course of their current or former principalships.

None of the principals relied solely on one piece of information or data point when they had concerns about a teacher's performance. Not a single participant relied on someone else's opinion about a teacher. They ensured that they observed the concerns for themselves through classroom observations, walk-throughs, and professional learning community (PLC) meetings. Issues such as classroom management, the engagement of students, student performance data, the comparison of one classroom to another similar classroom, and complaints stood out most to our principals. Stephen remembers that he often felt that he "did not want to observe her class, but I had to." The trends and findings from each principal are noted in Table 4. Generalized information will follow which will shed light on the context of the teacher improvement process from the principal stories of working with ineffective teachers.

Table 4

## Summary of Trends and Findings for Each Principal

<b>Principal</b>	<b>What stood out?</b>	<b>What support did you provide or seek out?</b>
Karen	Classroom management, EVAAS data, relationships with students and student engagement	Feedback and suggestions on classroom walk-throughs
Rebecca	Lack of planning, supervision & safety of students, parent complaints	Sought out support from central office staff (HR Director & Immediate Supervisor), school board attorney and NCAE rep
James	Number of write-ups/classroom management, parent complaints, content/instruction, student complaints	Met with teacher, feedback provided on observations and classroom walk-throughs
Stephen	Instruction was missing, concerned parents, Teacher Assistants did not want to be in there, custodian did not want to clean in there, classroom management, insubordination	More frequent visits, sought out others to observe, sought out advice from Elementary Ed Director, NCAE rep, school board attorney
Grace	Classroom management, students weren't getting it, comparison to similar classes	Weekly planning meetings
Ben	EVAAS & student achievement data, insubordination, poor classroom management, lack of student engagement, relationships with children, no lesson plans, work ethic, just not doing their job	Brought in outside observations, development of common assessments, sought advice from district curriculum experts, PD for all staff, feedback through walk-throughs
Brittani	Lack of engagement in the classroom, concern from others	Increased visibility in the classroom
Elena	Concern with instruction, parent complaints, classroom management	Sought assistance from central office staff, planning meetings, bi-weekly observations
Josh	Rigor missing in lessons, student engagement, attendance, comparison to other similar classrooms, difficulty keeping up, not prepared	Informal meeting—what is going on?
Kay	zero control of class, no real learning going on	Feedback

## Background

Ben had a wealth of knowledge to share from past experiences in working with ineffective teachers. He was known for being assigned to schools with the instructions to 'clean them up' and remembers that the

first thing I did is I didn't put them straight on action plans . . . it is what we would have considered a monitored plan, but with a little bit more weight, and what I did for those teachers, as I tried to invest some time and resources and even some heavy coaching with them.

When asked if he noticed any of the teachers being resistant to these supports, he replied with,

Not all of them, some of them were being resistant to any kind of coaching and they didn't want to change, so we started shifting, not so much on the plans yet but we started changing it to okay, now we need you to turn in your lesson plans and when they turned in their lesson plans, we would provide critical feedback on strategies to help them improve their classroom instruction, improve their classroom management, whatever may be the issue and really try to be very strategic in how we want to help them, and that really kind of separated some of the teachers who wanted to get help from those who didn't really want to get help and those that started to really kind of were resentful and didn't want to get help. They immediately almost became insubordinate to a degree.

Rebecca remembers from her first principalship having to wrestle with a decision between two veteran teachers who were underperforming. Her school failed for a second year and went into school improvement during the years of NCLB. She did seek out the help of her HR director and her personal supervisor, but decided that she could not tackle both teachers because it was just too much to handle. During the second and third year of her principalship, she made the decision based on one teacher being far worse than the

other as to who to focus her energy on. Both teachers had 27+ years of experience in the classroom. She prepared documentation on both teachers and she noted that the interesting piece to this is that one teacher really didn't fight it as much as the other one did. She was closer to her 30-year mark and went on and retired. The second teacher ended up retiring as well after the third documented notation for her personnel file. The school board attorney had already told her that,

No one, especially a tenured teacher like that, no one in the state of North Carolina has ever been dismissed for inability to perform academically, job performance in that sense, that I would really have to, I would have to put pressure for her to retire or catch her red-handedly having done something extremely inappropriate to be able to dismiss her, so I just the pressure on and she retired.

Stephen recapped a story about a teacher at his elementary school where he could never witness instruction taking place in her classroom. He started doing more frequent visits into her room hoping to catch a glimpse of the instruction, but still never could.

Every time I would come in the room, she would want to stop everything and have a conversation with me and the kids and it just—and I could never—it was like she was hiding—if she was doing instruction, it was hidden.

He had a lot of concerned parents who were volunteering and their children were in that room. He had others come in to do an observation: a peer teacher, the elementary education director, and even the personnel director. All of them agreed that no instruction was taking place. Elena had a teacher that over the course of two years, had gathered a lot of parent complaints, and noted concerns with instruction. She was able to integrate the support of Central Office staff when they decided that this teacher would be

observed on a bi-weekly basis, participate together in weekly planning meetings with this teacher where they reviewed lesson plans, and discussed what they wanted to see in that upcoming week's lessons that they were going to observe that week. This team of six leaders; one principal, two assistant principals, the assistant superintendent of instruction, the secondary curriculum coordinator, and the individual over secondary schools focused this much time and attention on this one teacher who they were supporting.

Kay summed it up well when talking about the why in supporting teachers. "I'm a firm believer in the walk-throughs and the observations, they need to be frequent, they need to be real, and they need to have feedback." It is important to her, as it was with every single principal interviewed that as administrators, they were leading the support and the coaching for these teachers who they had concerns about. They knew, just as Elena Aguilar (2013) shares in her book, that coaching creates conditions of excellence by increasing collaboration, individualizing support, and improving teacher effectiveness faster than traditional professional development techniques.

### **The Initial Conversation with the Ineffective Teacher**

After concerns were noted and investigated further for validity, principals then had to prepare to have the initial conversation with these teachers sharing their concerns. When this is the first time a principal is verbalizing concerns face to face with one of their teachers, it is easy to be rattled and lack confidence. To feel more confident, the principals in this study prepared for these conversations. First off, "make sure this is not an isolated decision," said Ben. Karen had to practice what she was going to say—she had to write it down and practice it. She practiced pretending the other person was not



receptive to what she was going to say so that she could think through how she would respond.

Karen, along with the others, articulated the need to share key artifacts based on what has been observed, what the data (student achievement, observations, walk-throughs, etc.) says, and the importance of bringing a strategy to this first meeting. Principals need to “take the time up front to do your homework and be prepared,” said Grace. Rebecca suggested taking the time to dig deeper into the academic data—do not assume they know what the numbers are and what they mean.

Take the time to provide a problem-solving opportunity for this teacher—don’t spoon feed them immediately on how to fix things in their classroom. Be sure to convey that you are going to work together and that you as the principal are going to support them. You may want to think about restructuring staffing in the building to include the provision of a strong teacher assistant or a very strong co-worker and teammate.

James reminded me of the importance of listening to the teacher—what do they think the problem is—are they even aware there is a problem? Every single principal also made mention of the importance of having another person present for this conversation. This person can take notes and ensure words are not twisted around. This second person can help to ensure the integrity of the conversation if it were questioned.

Ben said that he plays with his cards face up, all of the time. He said, “here are the last learning walks or here’s the observations, formal observation we’ve done including learning walks, and here’s other observations from outside folks, and all of this paints a picture of a major problem in your classroom.” It was his intent that teachers could clearly see what they were seeing. For him, he would always come back to the

data—test results, EVAAS, value added, subgroup information, etc. The goal at the end of every conversation that each principal shared about was that they all helped the teacher realize that this is about students and not about the teacher. Keep the conversation focused on students and focused on instruction. Rebecca noted that it gets a little hard and you begin questioning yourself, “am I being fair? Are my expectations where they should be? Am I being too harsh on this person? Am I right on?”

There were times that many principals mentioned that outside complaints fueled the concern about a particular teacher. In fact, all ten principals noted parent concerns and the principals who had led secondary schools also noted student concerns. James had students coming to him telling him that they can’t learn in that classroom.

As a principal, when a student comes to you and says, “I’m just not getting it” you have to take the time to understand why they are not getting it, but also figure out how to help him get it as well. Do you let those kids go a full year without getting it, then it takes them three years to catch up again?

“You need to help the teacher, but first and foremost, you have to help the students that are sitting there that have this teacher who is having problems,” said James. All of these things go through your mind as a principal. Stephen remembered back to Open House every year and how he would post the class rosters up in the hallways around 3pm.

I remember it vividly, I started getting knots in my stomach because I knew what would follow. I would have to talk a lot of parents off of a cliff and a lot of—trust me, we are working with her, she does care about kids and I would tell the parents, give her some time, give her two weeks at the beginning of the year, let’s see how it pans out. In two weeks, if there is still some concern—and sometimes because of her personality and ability to talk it up, she had the parents snowed. [Stephen on remembering if parents demanded that their child be put in another classroom when assigned to this particular teacher]

Like an onion, there is always an additional layer to think about—staff concerns from your own staff. Brittani shared that she had “staff members who were deeply concerned about the teacher but also very concerned about the students in that classroom” to the point where they were willing to give her their own teacher assistant time or tutor time in order to make sure somebody was always in there to support their colleague and their students. Elena noted that other staff members in the building knew that this particular individual was struggling and she thought that anytime they had tried to offer support, he was not receptive to it. In Josh’s school, he shared that the other teachers were the first to complain about their colleague because she was not willing to share resources with them and didn’t want to collaborate with them. In weekly meetings, the teacher “wanted to do their own thing and teach to a different beat.”

The principal needs to delicately receive the complaint, validate the concern, and ultimately share it with the teacher. Kay believes that “the biggest thing is to let parents and students know that I’m here to support them as well. I try to explain to teachers that I support everybody; I support parents, students, staff, I’m everybody’s cheerleader.” The principal has to figure out a way to make things work that aren’t currently working so when parents come with a concern, it is important to listen.

All of the principals had advice for when to have these conversations with teachers and suggested that you keep the students in mind with your timing as well. All ten principals made reference to having these conversations with teachers after school, during planning but only if their planning was at the end of the day, and on Fridays. They all recognized that these conversations could easily be upsetting to the teachers and

you should always provide the opportunity for them to leave the building without people seeing them upset when they are walking out. The reason for thinking about the timing of this meeting is to protect students too—an upset teacher is not going back into the classroom, thus allowing instructional time not to be interrupted. Karen said it was important for her to have a clear head and a fresh mind. Rebecca cautioned about ensuring you have plenty of time for these conversations—you need not rush them.

I think the number one important thing there is to make sure that the person you're meeting with knows they've got your full, undivided attention, and if they need time to talk and ask questions, that they will have that time. I always tried to plan things and if I thought it was going to be a conversation that was going to be contentious in any way, I had my assistant principal or my instructional coach, I usually always involved a third person to be a third set of eyes and ears as to what was said and what actually took place in the meeting. (Rebecca)

### **Next Steps**

Now that the principal has this concern about teacher performance, they have shared the concern with the teacher, they need to determine their next steps. What does the action plan look like and how does the principal begin the collection of artifacts? All ten principals agree that you should document everything and be very specific with your improvement goals and timelines. Karen used a google doc that she updated after every visit to this teacher's classroom about what she saw and every conversation she had to gather her documentation. She included opportunities for the teacher to observe others who were strong in her specific area of weakness. After each observation, the teacher would write about what they observed which could include a compare and contrast and review these with the principal. They would have conversations about what did you see

in there, what was the teacher doing, what do you do and what can you take away from this observation. Then, she would include watching videos of effective teaching, reading articles on classroom management, but every activity was followed by a written reflection by the teacher that they then met about. Rebecca had her teacher turn in weekly lesson plans that were reviewed by the instructional coach along with herself and then feedback and suggestions were provided to the teacher. Rebecca offered some wisdom as you travel through the action plan time in regards to observations.

One thing I have always tried to do when working with a teacher that we had concerns about was to ensure I didn't do all of their evaluations. I did one, I would get my IC to do one or my assistant principal if I had one and I would invite someone from Central Office to come that was either my supervisor or was an expert in the area at hand to come and do an evaluation, and the reason being it's just to make sure that it wasn't just- the information wasn't coming from me, so that it looked discriminatory in any way, so I invited in several people to observe. (Rebecca)

She also prescribed specific staff development for her teacher and had week-to-week meetings about curriculum. James included opportunities for his teacher to videotape himself teaching to review and write a reflection on. He also had weekly lesson plans submitted that he and his admin team provided feedback on. Turning in lesson plans has little to no value if the principal is not actively reviewing these and providing feedback to the teacher about what they expect to see and what changes are needed.

Both Stephen and Grace spoke to how cumbersome it was to document everything, but also how important it is. They also met weekly with their teachers on action plans and referenced them being very specific with teachers. When the principal is

documenting incidents such as a failure to comply with directives of a component of the action plan, Grace said,

you need to be upfront and let that teacher know that that documentation is going in their personnel file, because if you hold on to it at your office then it's, that's just what it is, it's a file in your office. I think once you explain to teachers that it is going into their personnel file, I think that puts a sense of urgency in place for them.

In crafting an action plan, Ben said that he molded all of the information from the initial conversation with the teacher into a very specific action plan that addressed the things they talked about. He would follow up about a week later to review the plan with the teacher. "I would spend an enormous amount of hours trying to make sure it specifically addressed just what the teacher needed to get better on," said Ben. Everything for him was data driven and he could easily show teachers where each point on the action plan was derived from. He updated the action plan weekly following his weekly meetings with teachers and ensured that the detailed timeline was followed and documented throughout.

Brittani always wanted to know how she could help the teacher, and so in every meeting that she had, she ended with that question for the teacher. It was important to her for her teacher to know that the admin team wanted nothing more than to support her and help her grow. Her action plans included at least three mini observations each week and weekly follow up with the teacher. She relied on the strategy of questioning to guide these meetings. She asked questions such as, "how do you feel like this is going?" and

“what do you notice about your instruction?” The questioning gave the teacher opportunities to think it out with the admin team.

Elena and her team reviewed weekly lesson plan submissions from her teacher and they provided supplemental resources to his lessons. So not only did they review them and ensure they were aligned with state standards, but they went as far as to research the content and make other resources available to this teacher. Making edits to his lesson plans helped them to ensure that students were getting the material that they needed and that they were going to be challenged if implemented as designed. Josh said that his weekly meetings gave him the opportunity to share with his teacher one thing each week that he wanted to see evident in her classroom when he visited—so each week that were adding something new to their expectations in her classroom. They documented their targets that they expected each week and then these became new look-fors during walk throughs and observations. According to Josh,

It was really almost like a beginning teacher form that we had created where she had to check off all of these things that had been done before school starts, and then once it started we started monitoring that for her, and we actually followed through with that plan, and she started to make gradual improvements, it wasn't leaps and bounds, but it was gradual.

Kay also included the support of a peer mentor in her action plan for her teacher. She noted that they placed her with the type of teacher to whom you could not say no, who was very excited about teaching. This gave her someone to talk to, work with, and plan with outside of the admin team who was supporting her. Despite the workload connected to leading an action plan in your building, each participant interviewed

brought it back to the students and the effect an ineffective teacher could potentially have on them. “You have to stay consistent and you have to stay with it—you can’t let it fall to the wayside because at the end of the day, if the students aren’t learning then that’s a problem,” said Kay.

### **Struggles and Challenges**

All ten principals also referenced their own personal reflection as they entered into this action plan time period with this teacher. Karen said, “in the midst of all of this I kept asking a question, ‘What could I do more, how could I help you, how could I make you more successful?’”

What stood out to me the most during these interviews with principals where we focused on the professional aspect of how working with an ineffective teacher affected them was their internal struggle. Karen said,

The big challenge was that this was an individual that I recommended, I had recommended to work here at my school, then I had to go back and almost rescind that recommendation and then recommend that they don’t come back to my school, so I think that was the hard part for me because everybody hopes that when you hire someone that it’s a good hire. You also hope that you can put all of this energy into coaching them and then when it doesn’t work out- that makes it difficult and challenging.

As the instructional leader in the building, she had to spend enormous amounts of time researching and studying that content and the standards to support this teacher in the classroom, but she also had to dig out resources and textbooks from her graduate coursework to refresh her thinking on the implementation of an action plan. Karen, along with Principals Stephen, Brittani, and Josh all noted that reviewing district policy, state



law, and multiple conversations with their human resources director were how they each sought out additional information and ensured total compliance on their end.

Rebecca was mostly challenged by the amount of documentation needed to support the life of an action plan.

It takes a lot of time, to balance everything and make sure you collect what you said you were going to collect, communicate effectively about everything that's an issue or everything that's in your letters, answer all questions from others politically, and ensure confidentiality at all times.

She struggled with preparing for conversations with the teacher because she wanted to take the time to look at everything from all angles so as to alleviate any surprises. She said she had to “make sure what I was doing was both the best for students and for the employee and the school.”

James struggled internally similarly to Karen in that he felt responsible for the mess this employee was creating in his school. James said, “I kind of felt responsible, because I'm like God, I'm the person that hired this person and they're just not cut out for teaching, you know, how could I have been so off-bound?” Stephen struggled with what else he could offer to his teacher. He worked with her on and off again with action plans for 6 years. “She was exhausting,” he said. Grace said, “my concern is for those children that are sitting in that classroom and you can't just uproot them and put them in someone else's class.” She said that there were many times that she wanted to go in there and just teach for her, but you can't and because you don't have the time to do that either.

Ben said that the most difficult part for him was the stick-with-it-ness or the patience. “You have to have the stick-with-it-ness to do it right. The reason action plans

take some folks multiple years is because of the lack of being really, really strategic, and saying I need you to fix A by B date.” He noted that it was never a good or easy feeling to know that you as the principal are forcing someone to do something they don’t like to do, and it is never a good feeling to know that basically if they don’t do it, you as the principal are going to have to recommend that HR fire them. That shouldn’t make anyone feel good. According to Ben,

I don’t care who are you, unless you’re really sick and twisted, I never enjoy terminating people, whether they were at-will classified folk or whether they were somebody you had to build documentation on, but the one thing that was reassuring out of all of it, and the one thing that kept me going out of all of it was knowing that if they improved, it was going to help kids.

His thinking aligned and connected with other principals in that their desire was only to help, coach, and support the teacher so that students benefited from their time in their classroom. None of our participants ever showed or shared any mean-spirited feeling about putting someone on an action plan. The principal’s focus has to be on the classroom and the students that sit in those seats. He also noted that creating and monitoring an action plan is a learning curve for everyone—“you don’t know what it is like until you live it and deal with it,” he said. Monitoring the action plan will wear the principal down and it is incredibly stressful. For an action plan to work, the person on the other end has to be willing to change.

Elena’s biggest concern lay in the fact that her ineffective teacher was tenured. “I think for all of us professionally, we know if they’re tenured, hands off, they’re kind of untouchable, so I was worried that we would do all of this and move for termination if

that's where we were going and then ultimately wouldn't be supported." That doesn't mean the principal ignores a tenured teacher who is ineffective—the principal still needs to go through the same process when you have a concern. The principal should be aware that it may take longer to move for termination, no one ever said that leading a school and expecting effectiveness from all was for the faint of heart. For Kay, the challenging part was knowing what to do next when the teacher was not doing their part on the action plan. She reached out to her HR director for questions about this and in the back of her mind always being reminded that the teacher is still in the classroom and the students are still not learning.

One final note from Josh with regard to the challenges and struggles of implementing an action plan with an ineffective teacher is that you can handle it, even when you feel like you can't. It is okay to ask questions to your supervisors, to other principals who have done this before, and to your HR director.

When I was going through that for the first time, I just wanted to make sure I was doing everything correctly and you know, when you think about an action plan you think about the effects of it and how you would ultimately dismiss a teacher from their position, I mean that's a big deal, so you want to make sure you're doing everything you can to either help or support that teacher, and I wanted to make sure that as an administrator that I had what I needed before I went into a room with her at any point. (Josh)

All ten principals also referenced their own personal reflection as they entered into this action plan time period with this teacher. Karen said, "in the midst of all of this I kept asking a question, what could I do more, how could I help you, how could I make you more successful?"

### **Overall Goal for an Ineffective Teacher**

It would be easy to assume that the goal of an action plan is to have enough documentation to get rid of a teacher, but that theme never surfaced in any of the thirty interviews with these principals. One goal was for the teacher to remain at the school, to improve, and for quality instruction to be provided to students. Another goal was to always do what is in the best interest of the students. “It’s never in my mind to be out to get people and get rid of them. It’s easier to coach them than to get rid of them,” said Karen. Rebecca commented that “coaching someone was always something she enjoyed getting to do.” Helping someone else reach their full potential is a process but a joy.

Throughout these interviews, one theme that did surface when talking about each of their goals for their teachers was the theme of being hands on during the timeline of the action plan. The principals did not give action plans to someone else to supervise or to see through. Rebecca said that she very directly involved.

I really don’t think there is a way as a principal you can’t be directly involved in that and you’ve got to be the primary person, once you bite that apple it’s your apple, so you may get some assistance with things but when it comes to documentation, that’s yours. (Rebecca)

All of the principals shared that they met weekly with their teachers to review progress along the action plan and discuss the classroom walk-throughs and observations from the week. They noted that there would be times where stuff is added into the action plan—not necessarily extra things for the teacher to do, but strategies to be even more specific on how to get better. The principal has to be willing to modify as you go. Brittani even noted that she had the teacher give input when modifications were being made which

allowed her teacher to have input into what was going on that would affect or directly impact her classroom. Any changes come back to the theme of the principal's professional goal for the teacher; to see them improve and see students learning. Ben shared a success story for one of the action plans that he oversaw.

There was one situation with one of my CTE teachers where the teacher actually got better, and when she started getting better and started doing the things we need her to do, we backed off. I moved our weekly meetings to every two weeks, then I moved them to once a month and then eventually I terminated the plan early because she got better and she did the things that we needed to do and the irony was is that she went on a plan in September and she was flinging a fit about it, but she did the things we told her to do. She was off the plan in February.  
(Ben)

### **Impact on Whole School**

Everyone knows who the struggling teachers are shared majority of the principals. The students leave their class and talk about it, parents talk about it in the community, and sometimes even the struggling teacher tells others about their action plan. Rebecca said that it can bring morale down at times in your building. Teachers recognize that student achievement is being affected, and that can have implications for all in your building. She also noted though that the staff will see that you will hold them accountable to high expectations.

If it's done correctly, they will see you as fair and professional, yet you do your job and in so many instances, having a situation like this—it's a bit of a shake up for those on your staff who maybe were gliding and they decide they'll get in gear and pick their performance up a little bit. (Rebecca)

Having an ineffective teacher on an action plan takes a great deal of the principal's time, so what can happen is that instead of being able to go and do walk-throughs in all classrooms, the principal is focusing all of this attention on this one teacher. That kind of hurts the school building to some extent. Sometimes too, the knowledge of someone else being on an action plan can breed a bit of fear in the school building. Brittani hoped that at the end of the day, others in the building knew that this ineffective behavior would not be tolerated for the kid's sake. Josh said that others in his building saw that they were trying to do everything to help this teacher—that they were a team and that they wanted to see both the teacher and the students succeed.

### **Words of Wisdom**

Not all ineffective teachers are the ones you are coaching out the door. “The defining factor for me,” said Karen, “is if they listen for good feedback, if they accept, and if they put it in place.” It doesn't matter their years of experience, what matters is if they are willing to reflect, accept feedback and change. If teachers are willing to listen, willing to put in the work, and willing to have perseverance to stick it out, they are going to make it. It is important to build the community of ‘we are in this together and we are all here to grow and learn.’ James said, “even if it is going well, you are probably going to still dread doing it, and it is never easy, but it does get easier.” Stephen said his first experience with an ineffective teacher “lit a fire under him to not allow a teacher like that to hide in a school.” These experiences had a big impact on him and it made him less passive about instruction. “It kind of changed my DNA a little bit about leadership and

wherever I went as a principal, that challenge, I would hit it head on, I would not let it drag out,” said Stephen.

Ben reminds us that you have got to be very specific when writing your action plans and documenting your updates. You have to be detail oriented, strategic and specific in how you are going to help this teacher become better because ultimately, if they get better what’s the outcome? Student success! Brittani spoke words of wisdom when she shared how important it is to try to take the other person’s perspective so that you do not take things personally. Be sure to allow the teachers time to vent, but always be reminded that you have to first be concerned with what we’re doing here and why we’re here and that’s because of the students. The students have to be getting the best education possible.

I personally feel as the principal at school, it’s my job as the chief professional development officer of that school in helping my teachers become better and if they’re not getting better than that means I’m not doing something right, and maybe that’s the double edged sword of being a principal, because not only am I the teacher or better example, not only am I the prosecutor but I’m also the defense attorney and I also have to be the judge, jury, and executioner, all in one person and that’s not an easy place to sit some days. My advice would be to stick with it and I did then, but my voice says don’t take it too personally, because ultimately, they will do what they need to do or they won’t. (Ben)

### **Personal Challenges with Which Principals Struggled**

As principals navigate the professional waters for identifying an ineffective teacher, we are reminded that all principals are human and completely aware of the effects of an action plan on another person and how the principal could ultimately move to dismiss a teacher from their position. That’s a big deal and that causes us to be

reminded that principals have emotions and feelings, too. During our personal interviews, principals opened with sharing about what emotions were present within them when they recognized the concern for the classroom teacher's performance. Themes such as guilt, disappointment, anger, concern for the students and being afraid monopolized these interviews.

Karen initially felt bad for her students because they were not getting what they needed from this teacher. In her mind, "she had selected the wrong person and my students were not getting what they need to be successful in life." She felt guilt. She left the classroom after each visit just feeling really down. Rebecca felt concern over her students, but also concern for the adult. This was a person she thought very positively of, but professionally, they just weren't up to standard. She felt a bit of trepidation "in that no one likes to deal with conflict," she said.

James felt both anger and disappointment that his students were suffering from the English teacher he was working with who did not comply with the action plan and its directives "which created more indigestion over time" for the principal each week at their meetings. He was left feeling like he was the bad guy when he was only being driven by feeling like the students deserved to have better instruction in front of them. Another teacher he worked with created a lot of concern in him over her mental health. Stephen also mentioned this:

As an administrator, when you hear someone say that they want to take their life and on the other end you know you haven't done anything to her but you're thinking if something like this happened on my watch, I don't know what I would do, you know, that would be very tough.



It was a very tough time for Stephen and he said he even had to let up on the pressure he was putting on this teacher. It was a very difficult situation that really “started wearing on me,” he said.

Grace found herself concerned over time—what does the principal do with those students while the admin team is taking the time to work with the teacher? These situations were very emotional for her as she always tried to find out the why behind what was affecting the teacher.

There’s an emotional side of actually dealing with the human side of the teacher, because it is business, but you do have to understand that some things are going on as well in the lives of the teachers. And when I think about a situation with death, or divorce, you’re dealing with a person who’s dealing with all of those issues that are spilling into or affecting their job. (Grace)

Ben said he always felt really concerned about the students being able to succeed. This concern was mixed with anger as he “probably assumed that folks who were in the classroom would bust their butt as much as I would’ve when I was in the classroom,” he said. He had an expectation that teachers would work and do whatever it takes to be successful and not shortchange children. It bothered him significantly.

Brittani’s biggest emotions were disappointment and anger. “I was just angry,” she said, “because I’m like why are you not doing this? I know you can do it, why are not doing it?” For Brittani, this was her school, these were her students, these were her teachers, so it was like her work family. As the principal, she felt responsible and upset when someone disappoints. Elena was always thinking about the students. She said that she always measured the classrooms by asking herself if she would want her own son in

that room. Josh felt angry because he felt like this teacher was doing a disservice to students. Kay felt afraid and nervous about the conversation she knew she was going to have to have with this teacher.

### **Sitting Down with the Teacher**

Meeting with the teacher can be both uneasy and difficult. Principals have to be careful because of possible mental health problems, anxiety, and their overall well-being. Karen remembers being thoughtful about recapping what the teacher would say. She would use the technique of always going back and saying, “what I hear you saying is such and such.” Rebecca would always rehearse what she needed to say to the teacher. This looked like rehearsing it in her head and jotting down notes. She made sure to stick to the facts and to ask good clarifying questions when and if the teacher got defensive. She always made sure to bring it back to the performance issue and be sure it was clear that this was not a personal issue.

James opened all of his meetings with teachers on as much of a positive note as possible. He would ask them how things were going and work to see if he could get them to tell him about what the problem is. He said it is so important to “try not to get upset, try not to get defensive back at them, and to stick to the facts.” Stephen always dreaded these meetings and never felt good about them, but his trick was to remain calm. Grace couldn’t narrow it down to just one emotion during these meetings.

You have a job to do, but when you do know other things are going on, you personally go through sympathy, empathy, but I think that one of the things that hits us as administrators is guilt. You personally have to talk to yourself and tell yourself that you’re not out to get that person, you’re out to help them succeed.  
(Grace)

The experiences that Ben had allowed him to try to take the emotions out of the meetings he had with teachers. It was “all business to me,” he said. He would always give himself 24-48 hours to process what he had witnessed in the classroom before he typed it up to ensure that his emotional state did not cloud his judgment of what he saw in the observation.

For me, it always comes back to doing a disservice to kids, so understanding that they [the teacher] may become defensive was kind of irrelevant to me. Like I said, it was all business, it comes back down to what are you doing to help kids be successful and if you're not then why are in this profession to begin with, because I'm of the mindset that we should always want to grow, whether you're a teacher, a principal, an assistant principal, whatever, a central office person, you should always want to grow and get better at your craft, you know. (Ben)

For Brittani, she would plan out how the issues were going to be addressed, but said, “it was not a pleasant day.” She would work to set up a comfortable atmosphere by meeting in a neutral location. She worked to keep the conversation simple about what her points were going to be. It was always her goal to keep the discussion very conversational because it was her goal to alleviate any nervousness on the side of her teacher. Josh felt like he needed to be prepared for these meetings which included being clear in the types of help that he was going to offer to her. Kay was nervous in how the meeting would pan out, but her goal was to keep the conversation professional and to continue to focus the concern on the students.

Unanimously, all ten principals admitted that if there was an easy part of these conversations with teachers, it was the documentation, having the concrete data to support their concerns. Rebecca also noted that for her, keeping the conversations calm

was a natural part of who she is which made these difficult conversations easier for her. She was very intentional in the way that she phrased things and worked to be a good listener when the teacher was talking. Ben said that the flow of the meeting was the easy part for him because he is a planner by nature and liked to have everything planned out. Elena said that the preparation for the meeting is what is easy for her because you know what has to be done. It is easy to offer the support for Josh. He felt like that was a very natural part of being an instructional leader.

The principals had some variety in verbalizing what was difficult about these meetings. Karen and James said it is difficult when you have the same conversation over and over and nothing is changing or they still don't get it. Getting the teacher to see what you see or understand what the data says is difficult. When it is not getting any better, that is when it becomes difficult. Rebecca said that sometimes saying what has to be said is the difficult part because, "it's not her natural state to enjoy conflict in any way." Stephen said that one of his teachers never wanted to hear what he had to say.

Our relationship changed a lot after I had driven her to the hospital, because I realized that she was sick. Before then, I kind of maybe thought she was, but I didn't know how sick, but when someone says they want to hurt themselves in front of you, it was a wakeup call for me. You can't replace a life and I don't want to ever push someone over the edge if they're very fragile, and that's kind of the best way to say it, she was just mentally fragile, but lazy, very, very lazy.  
(Stephen)

For him, just having the meeting itself was difficult because he had to tiptoe around his concerns in order to ensure he was protecting her mental health. Ben said that the most difficult part for him was not taking anything about the meeting personally.

They think that you're just out to get them and you're an awful person, they'll do all kinds of terrible things. I've been in meetings where teachers have slammed stuff or they have thrown stuff or teachers have broke down and cried. I've seen it all. (Ben)

Another hard part for Ben was ensuring his assistant principal didn't feel like they had to protect him. He would need to sit them down ahead of the meeting and remind them to be that extra set of eyes and ears only. The difficult part for Brittani was when teachers got upset—you can try to expect it, but it is still difficult to see. Getting everything written down and having a clear timeline and clear strategies is difficult for Elena. She takes the time to share the plan with her HR director and immediate supervisor to seek out wisdom from them.

At least three of the Principals (Karen, Rebecca and Stephen) had to push aside the knowledge of a possible mental health issue as one of the factors they were dealing with. Stephen said that once this surfaced, it “constantly haunted me.” He became much most passive with this teacher because of this. He said he was not proud of this, “but felt like I had to back off in the fear that she would hurt herself.” Ben said that he had to push aside knowing that the teacher was a really likeable person and also knowing that they have a family and others to support.

I remember one time I was dealing with a single parent and it was very difficult because she was going through a god-awful divorce and so I gave her as much leeway as possible and really tried to help her be successful. The divorce settled over the summer and so we held off putting her on an action plan that spring before her divorce finalized, her divorce finalized, she came back to school, she told me she was ready to go, we immediately tried to get her doing some professional development, some things to help her be successful, and she went to hell in a handbasket faster than I've ever seen in my life, and I don't think it had anything to do with the divorce, but it may have, I don't know. But I felt terrible

because we had to, I mean, we had said you've got to do these things or else this is gonna happen, and she was a better teacher when she was under emotional duress in the spring than she was in fall when she didn't have any, and she went really, really south in a hurry, and so we worked and worked and worked and tried to help her and help her and help her, and then so come December it was evident that she was just going—getting worse, so come January, we told her we're going to have to put you on a plan—you feel bad, but you know, you have to almost have a poker face, you feel bad in some of those situations. (Ben)

For Kay, she noted that she wants teachers to like her and respect her and you of course want them to agree with you. When you have to have a difficult conversation with them, you have to push that people pleasing part of you aside and recognize that you have a job to do. At the end of the day, ineffective teachers are harming children and it is just plain, downright educational malpractice.

### **The Struggles of the Principals**

The principals struggled professionally while working with their ineffective teachers, and they had personal struggles as well. Karen struggled with wanting to fix this individual. “Follow through with an individual is difficult, and realizing you have done all of this work and put in all of this time, and they were still, you know, ineffective, that was hard to swallow,” she said. She was hoping that her action plan and her supports were exactly what this teacher needed, but she realized that sometimes, you just can't fix certain things. Rebecca struggled with time management—overseeing an action plan is time consuming, but her job as a principal effectively running a school did not change even though she now added action plan manager to the list of things to do each day.

I think the other part that's very difficult is trying to be patient, because you've got concerns about student growth, you've got concerns about—sometimes you've got parent complaints coming down your neck, sometimes you have

situations looming that you feel are pressing but you have to be patient enough to allow your interventions, your data collection to happen when you feel like there are other things that are urgent. (Rebecca)

Ben also struggled with time management which he said was “brutal.” Principals Josh and Kay also noted time management as their struggle. They had to set schedules and reminders to complete tasks, observations and documentation in order to stay on top of things.

Principals James, Brittani, Josh and Kay all noted that remaining positive was something they wrestled with. Brittani said that she felt like everyone in her building was working so hard, but this person wasn’t—and that was frustrating to her. It was hard to stay positive knowing that. It was easy for Josh to point out to his teacher that this is what you were doing wrong, but it was more difficult for him to work to find positive things to share with his teacher too. Kay found it difficult to be positive when her teacher was not receptive to the help that was being offered to her.

Elena decided that that hardest part for her was working through the plan because it is so much work on you as the administrator. Weekly meetings, weekly observations and walk-throughs, reviewing lesson plans—it all takes an intense amount of time and you have to hold yourself accountable for that timeline. Navigating the back channels was a difficult task for Ben. He shared a story about one of experiences working with an ineffective teacher where it was just hard.

Watching the stabbing in the back is the thing that I don’t think principals think about when they’re trying to do this the right way. Particularly when you’re putting a veteran on a plan, you’ve got to remember that those veterans are in cliques in your buildings, particularly in a high school, and they run their mouths.

As much as you say this is between you and me and it's a personnel matter, and we're trying to help you get better, they go and run their mouth not only to the teachers, but they run it in the community. Then, you're playing clean up not only for trying to help that teacher get better, but you're trying to play clean up in a community, whether you're at the doggone Food Lion picking up cupcakes, or you're at the football game or you are at a PLC meeting for a completely different subject. Those were hard. (Ben)

It is difficult knowing that a teacher needed to be gone and that you are stuck with them for the entire year. It is difficult to listen to a parent share a complaint about a teacher and all you can respond with is I'm working on this. Parents begin to think you're not being supportive and you're not listening.

### **As Time Went On**

As our principals continued their work with their ineffective teachers, they were asked if their feelings about the teacher changed at all. Most said that their feelings toward the individual teacher did not change, but their feeling about whether or not this was a redeemable situation changed. Rebecca said that as you go through the life of the action plan, you begin to ask yourself "is this working or not?"

I think at some point, I mean if we want to be honest, at that point, at some points you kind of say, okay, I'm kind of giving up on this person because the things we're trying, they're not being accepting of or they're not trying or they don't seem to get it, you know, if we've modeled, we've done this, we've done—we've sat down and wrote lesson plans with them, but even with gradual release they can't seem to do it on their own, so you know, you kind of make that decision of they're just, it's not there, they're not capable. (Rebecca)

Ben said that he would grow tired during the duration of some of the action plans, but he knew he had to maintain his mental focus. Josh said that as time went it, it became easier and easier to communicate with his teacher the more they met with one another.



Action plans can last far longer than the typical ninety days for which they are written. Karen said she could always tell by the halfway point of the school year if the teacher was going to make it or not. Rebecca said it was different for each teacher for her. What set the teachers apart for her was their seriousness in adhering to the action plan timelines and their willingness to make the necessary changes. James said that most of his teachers decided on their own that teaching was not for them and eventually resigned from their job. He could usually tell if an action plan was going to be successful or not by the teacher's receptiveness. If they refused to acknowledge the problem or were not willing to utilize the resources provided, he could make the conscious decision in the back of his mind that this was not going to end well.

As a principal, when you have exhausted every resource and you have given it everything you've got—when you've done everything—those are the times when it is time to say enough is enough. For some of our principals, it took 2-3 years to get to this point with a teacher. At this point, it is almost like damage control—where can you put this teacher in your building where s/he will cause the least damage to students? Where can you hide them?

Very often, Rebecca said that you can tell within the first few weeks of the action plan if the teacher is going to make it or not because you can already begin to see some turnaround. If they can't seem to meet deadlines, "that is a telltale sign that things are going to go well," she said. If they are compliant, are putting forth the effort and are taking things seriously, then that is often a sign that they are teachable, coachable, and they can turn things around. Brittani was looking for that spark. They tried different

grade levels and different positions, everything they could possibly think of to find the right fit for her teacher. “So it was kind of like a flock of sheep and you’ve got this one little dark grey sheep sitting there, and they really stood out among the crowd. It was really kind of sad,” she said.

Continued interactions with their ineffective teachers became privately stressful for some of our principals. Out in the building though, it was business as usual. Rebecca said, “I did lose a lot of sleep over these people because you know emotionally, no one wants to take away someone else’s gainful employment,” she said. When you continue to ask yourself is it fair to the students in that classroom, it becomes a very stressful thing to go through. She worried a lot about the children and lost a lot of sleep. Most of our principals remembered that their teachers never once saw this experience as positive for them. It was always something they were forcing on the teacher, which it was. “It was also stressful because you never knew how the teacher would react,” said Brittani. During some of the meetings, you could feel the tension in the room which made the meetings uncomfortable.

The principals needed to vent and brainstorm with others who have traveled down this path of working with ineffective teachers before, but also had to maintain confidentiality when they did. All of them confided with in house support which included additional members of their administrative team if there were any and their instructional coach. Principals also reached out to their immediate supervisors and their HR director for guidance. Rebecca said it best when she said, “You can’t do this alone.”

I wanted someone else's perspective and so I oftentimes would, you know, as I told you before, I—if I had someone who was having problems, I didn't allow myself to be the only one that observed. I asked for others, even central office to come and observe so that I didn't—it didn't—if I were wrong, I wanted to be told I was wrong. (Rebecca)

James utilized his admin team to vent behind closed doors which allowed him the opportunity to be candid and honest. Grace agreed that it was important to vent, but she warned, “you had better know who you're venting to.” Ben said he would be lying if he said he didn't internalize a lot of it, which he noted was incredibly unhealthy. Brittani reached out to her mentors and it was a big relief to her just to be able to talk to someone in a professional way that could just give some feedback on what they felt like should be your next steps. Everyone needs that sounding board to reflect on how you are handling the situation.

### **Words of Wisdom**

If principals are not careful, the ineffective teacher can hinder teacher morale, especially if they are teaching a content area that impacts the school report card and the school letter grade. If one person is not carrying their weight, it puts more burden and more pressure on the other teachers in that department. One of the most stressful things a principal can deal with is to see someone around you fail. James reminds us that working with an ineffective teacher can also be frustrating because you hired them and you don't want to think about letting the students down. We had several principals who had challenges with the mental health component of working with an ineffective teacher.

It's bad enough dealing with it [mental health] with your kids, but when you're dealing with it with staff that you are trusting to teach your kids, and then you

struggle with okay, that this person is sick, so you've got to see it as a sickness, not as a deficiency or a weakness and that plays with your mind. How much of it is a sickness? How much of it is a deficiency? How much of it is laziness? What do you do? (Stephen)

Working with an action plan and with a teacher so closely can really pull at your heart strings and cause you to really begin to question yourself.

Ben said that we have to “focus on what’s right by kids.” If you use that for your marker, you are doing it for the right reasons. That doesn’t mean you won’t carry a burden around with you—there is a face on the other side of that paper.

I remember carrying that burden as the principal of the school, knowing you’re juggling that line between helping kids and/or helping a teacher and/or getting rid of a teacher and knowing that on the other side of that, that teacher may or may not find another job or may or may not be successful at another career, or may or may not be able to put food on the table. I’ll never forget one time I did that, and one of the two teachers I non-renewed, I had to go sit in on their unemployment review that the Employment Security Commission for termination, and it’s never a good feeling knowing that you can put somebody in an unemployment line. It’s painful, at the same time you have to be firm enough in your conviction to know that hopefully you saved some children educationally. (Ben)

You can’t improve a low performing school with low performing teachers; you have to be willing to make the changes necessary in order to positively impact student achievement. When you initiate an action plan with a teacher, Brittani said it “really showed her where my line in the sand was.” She learned what she was willing to do and what amount of energy she was willing to devote to this plan. It strengthened her compass and it allowed her to see where her true north and south were.

If the action plan goes well, it is great for everyone. If you end up with a good result, you made a teacher a better professional. “You’ve ultimately positively impacted kids,” said Elena.

### **Political Ramifications**

The principals used multiple data points when making the conscious decision that a teacher qualified as ineffective in their minds. During this time, they all referenced current law to review. The principals reviewed the same laws, which included the tenure law, other general statutes, local school board policy and the teaching code of ethics since they are not typically on the forefront of their minds. Several of our principals mentioned that they had to pull out old graduate level law books to refresh themselves of this information. Karen needed to also be clear on probationary status and what exactly it says since it is year to year. When they had questions, their best contact was their HR director. Stephen found out that “getting rid of teachers because of poor performance is not a comfortable thing for districts.” It was very exhausting to him to have a teacher, a marginal teacher on an action plan. Brittani also struggled with “the continuous mediocrity of practice.” Her teacher did not do anything that would cause her to lose her license. She just had to daily watch her students not get the same quality of education as the students next door. Trying to battle poor instruction is really hard especially in light of the tenure situation. “It was very, very difficult because of the amount of evidence and the burden of proof that lies on administration to move forward with a dismissal,” she shared.

## **Legal Representation**

Most of our principals had been threatened by the participation of a lawyer on the side of the teacher, but none of them actually ever sat down with one. The school board attorney was consulted multiple times with many of our principals. One additional political participant was the teacher association representative. Rebecca actually had the school board attorney tell her there had never been a tenured teacher fired in North Carolina for incompetence. Her best bet was to coach this teacher out of the building into retirement or a career change. Ben already knew about the teacher association representative, so he would be proactive and invite this person to come and join him on an observation just as another set of eyes. He would ask this individual if there was anything he was leaving out in regard to the support he was providing because his end game was always helping the teacher to improve.

## **What is Missing from Current Law?**

There was some common disagreement about the tenure law. It was good because principals couldn't arbitrarily fire people, but it also safeguarded some who were incompetent. James said, "we are the only profession that it takes something bad to get rid of a teacher." In other profession, poor performance reviews could have ended your tenure at that company, but in teaching, it is much more difficult to dismiss a teacher with poor performance reviews. He believes every employee should have due process.

I know in some places, if you do something like, what we have with this teacher, if I have 35, 37, 38 complaints on you, meaning written, handwritten student complaints and then I have five or six parents and then I have staff coming to you saying it's negative, it's negative. If you have an employee that has 38 customer complaints about them, pretty more than likely, and I mean solid, meaning

written, they took the time to write out those complaints and were specific on what they said and the same thing, because I don't even know if that video of her degrading the student, would have been enough to dismiss her. I don't see that in any other profession. (James)

Stephen wished that our current law addressed growth and good instructional practices. From what he could see, it was just about the basic taking care of the kid. Ben had a different take on current law—he didn't believe anything was missing from current law. He believed what is missing is the understanding on the part of the principals for the need of the stick-with-it-ness that you have to have to dismiss somebody that either has tenure or does not. He said, "you've got to provide them every outlet to be successful. And yes, it's going to be ten times more work for you than it ever will be for a teacher." The law is there to protect the teachers. We [the principals] can't be scared of the law. "If you are really in education to help children, then you need to put that as a priority, and do whatever it takes to make sure that children are successful." The sheer amount of documentation needed is the biggest challenge in current law shared Brittani. The burden of proof that is needed is so time consuming. Josh feels like current law has a lot of hurdles to jump through. "At some point," he said, "there needs to be a question of how long is long enough?"

### **Words of Wisdom**

Rebecca had a unique situation with one of the ineffective teachers she worked with who just so happened to be the best friend of the Assistant Superintendent at the time who was her immediate supervisor and who completed her evaluation. Rebecca recommends that if a principal were to find themselves in a similar situation, be honest

and up front. Tell them [assistant superintendent] what was happening and what you are doing. She said that to this day she “respects that woman deeply because she supported me and told me I needed to follow through and do what I had to do.” The principal still going to be the bad guy when you begin documenting and possibly dismissing people. It can create an us against them mentality and to some degree, it diminishes a degree or trust in the school building. Stephen noted that if his teacher had been the “right person in the community,” she could have made things very difficult.

Ben had some difficult times in regard to the political side of working with an ineffective teacher. “Politically, outside of the school, it made my life hell,” he said. He said that he had to put them in plans because they were committing educational malpractice. That made his life miserable, but was it what was best for children? Absolutely.

Was it what was best for me politically as the principal of the school? Under no circumstances. It gave me no cover and no ability to hide or protect myself or anything, I mean, it- politically when you put somebody on a place, there is no cover. And if that person lives in the community or has connections to the community, then you know, and I know, that it’s going to be brutal for the length of that plan. (Ben)

He had one teacher that he put on a plan that was neighbors with a member of the Board of Education. This school board member wanted to raise all kinds of trouble over this. He said he had that school board member breathing down his neck. Did he do it for the right reasons? He said he did.

Elena said that the hardest thing with the political part is that you can never tell your side of the story because of the protective personnel piece that goes along with it.



Everything is protected. When you are being confronted with people that feel like they know what's happening and are angry or upset with you for their friend and you can't defend yourself. Kay had a situation where the public got word of things and she got numerous phone calls, e-mails and social media postings and she couldn't discuss anyone's personnel with them. "That became hard," she said, "because folks on the outside of this don't understand."

The political side is one of the hardest and trickiest to navigate. It is not for the faint of heart, but, if at the end of the day, you can honestly know that you are doing what is best for children, then you must make that hard decision. These principals have shared stories of their work with ineffective teachers and their struggles and have allowed us to journey with them through this process.

### **Summary**

The principals all relied on similar characteristics to determine where concerns were in the school building. Students were at the forefront for each concern shared in Table 4 and included classroom management, instructional concerns, and achievement data. In summary, the principals all struggled with three areas and it was difficult to determine which was the biggest struggle for them. The details could easily tip the scale on this. Rebecca wrestled professionally with which of her two teachers should she move forward with an action plan on and was it fair to the children in the class where she did impose this documented plan and support to continue to sit in a classroom where concerns were present. Stephen shared about how working with a teacher who had mental health concerns really impacted him personally. He did not want to the

underlying root cause to the teacher's growing mental health concerns. If something had happened to her on his watch, he would not have been able to forgive himself. Ben seemed to struggle the most politically because he was tasked with cleaning up a school. He later found out that many of the teachers he was working with had school board connections. This proved to make things difficult for him.

With all of this research and information gleaned from the principal stories, how will this impact principal preparation and professional development? We will visit the implications from this phenomenon of working with incompetent teachers and discuss further what we will do with this information.

**CHAPTER V**

**THE PHENOMENON OF WORKING WITH AND/OR DISMISSING  
INCOMPETENT TEACHERS**

The purpose of this study was to provide narratives of principals' experiences of how they worked with and/or moved to dismiss an incompetent teacher.

When teacher performance concerns rear their ugly heads (and they will), we must embrace the responsibility of addressing them directly and attentively. The work, the effort, the emotion, the toil, the stress of dealing with these issues—those are temporary. The outcomes are permanent: for students, for our schools, for our communities. (Hall, 2019, p. 17)

We have traveled through the stories of ten current and former principals who have walked this road. They began on their journeys first by knowing their school achievement data and being present in classrooms conducting both formal observations and informal walk-throughs. This allowed them first-hand knowledge of classrooms that were not running effectively.

This study sheds light into the process of working with an ineffective teacher first by implementing a plan of support designed to elicit instructional improvements, working closely with immediate supervisors and HR department, and perhaps making a recommendation for non-renewal or dismissal. Not all of the principals had to make a recommendation for non-renewal or dismissal as they saw their teachers make growth and eventually work their way off of their plans. Others saw their teachers make their own decisions about moving on such as transferring schools or retiring before their

principal had to make such a recommendation. None of our ten participants actually had dismissed a teacher; only one recommendation was submitted to the Superintendent for dismissal, but was voted down by the school board. Through the work of our principals and their ineffective teachers, we examined how this challenge affects the principal professionally, personally, and politically as we sought out to answer the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The study investigated the following research questions:

1. How do principals determine the ineffectiveness of a teacher?
2. What action plan and thought process does the principal use to grow and improve a teacher identified as ineffective?
3. How do principals come to the decision that a teacher should be dismissed?
4. How did this process effect the principal professionally, personally, politically?
5. What effects does the dismissal process have on the principal's practice?
6. What effects on school climate, culture, and operations do principals describe?

### **Conclusions**

#### **How Do Principals Determine the Ineffectiveness of a Teacher?**

Principals all based their determination of ineffectiveness of a teacher on several of the following; evaluation data, student achievement data, informal classroom walk-throughs, formal observations, statements from others, high failure rates, discipline data, a willingness to change, and/or a comparison of how other students in similar classes are

doing. Some of the principals looked at information from the start of the school year to the fall (several months) while others looked at trends over several years. In short, it was a multi-faceted approach that led these principals to these conclusions about teacher quality. It is important to note that not a single principal made this decision based on one single piece of data or from one single incident.

### **What Action Plan and Thought Process Does the Principal Use to Grow and Improve a Teacher Identified as Ineffective?**

Each principal generated an action plan with the sole goal of it to be a plan of support for each teacher. As the instructional leader in the school building, it is the principal's duty and responsibility to not shy away from having a difficult conversation with a teacher and they should be willing to invest in the improvement of that teacher. Effective administrators don't dance around teacher performance issues. De Bevoise (1984) reminds us that as principals, we are to "monitor student and teacher performance" (p. 20). Schwanke (2016) noted that being that instructional leader does not make us an expert, but we are confident of what good instructional looks like and we know how "to promote a culture of learning and growth" (p. 63).

Multiple principals cited the need for being specific when creating your action plan. "Confront the issue head-on by clarifying expectations, offering descriptive feedback, stating the specific concern, providing helpful resources, trusting the process, and ultimately sharing the responsibility to either fish or cut bait" (Hall, 2019, p. 16).

Principals should think of this action plan as a road map for this teacher and the principal that addresses specific concerns where growth is needed. Along the way, action plans can be amended and modified as the teacher works their way through it. Stephen added,

Sometimes in the middle of the plan, we'd realize that we need to stop mid-year and shift . . . sometimes we would have to add stuff but it wouldn't be stuff that would be over and above, it would be more specific towards this is how we're help, you're already, you're making some progress in this, here's something we can add to it that's gonna help you be even better.

The principals did not work in isolation when creating and implementing their action plans. In addition to brainstorming with their on-site admin team and instructional leads, all of them also cited the desire to connect with central office staff for additional guidance and support. They reached out to immediate supervisors, members of the HR department and the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. In addition, several of the principals looked to their mentors for wisdom and insight. If principals are looking for a magic number of strategies to include in the action plan, Principals James, Stephen, and Brittani all suggested five as their go to number. It was important to them to be specific, to address what impacted students the most, and to be thoughtful about where you are “going to get the biggest bang for your buck” (Brittani).

The majority of the action plans began with a 90-day timeline when initially implemented with classroom teachers. Some of the action plans ended there with a recommendation for non-renewal and/or dismissal while others were continued. Karen said that she could tell about halfway through the action plan where it was going. We learned from Stephen that he worked with one teacher off and on (due to some mental

health concerns) for six years with her action plan. There is no magic timeline for an action plan other than the minimal 90 days. If teachers are growing, you might choose to wean off and meet every other week vs. every week during the plan just as Ben shared.

### **How Do Principals Come to the Decision That a Teacher Should Be Dismissed?**

Principals were able to easily say that the focus changed from improvement to dismissal when teachers weren't willing to change, weren't willing to participate and were borderline insubordinate in following the plan. When this happened, principals knew that the teachers were not invested in growing and becoming better. It was more difficult for them [principals] to be more specific about when the focus changed with teachers who were trying, but still weren't making the cut. Josh said that he just knew in his gut that she [the teacher] was not going to make the growth even though the effort was there. "Teaching just wasn't for her," he said.

Principals came to the decision that dismissal was needed or that the opportunity to "coach them into retirement" as Rebecca shared, was a priority when that determining factor of whether or not they are willing to reflect, accept feedback and change was obvious. It didn't matter to Rebecca or Kay if the teacher is a beginning teacher or a veteran teacher with 20+ years in education, if that willingness was not evident, they knew that the focus had to shift. Coupled with the support from their central office staff, principals began to have conversations with their teachers about the change in direction and the involvement of central office staff. This could easily change the nature of the relationship with the teacher. According to Karen, she saw her teachers "play nice," with central office staff while Rebecca and James saw a change in the level of seriousness

with the teachers because if it wasn't clear before, they [the teachers] now knew that they [the principals] meant business. James even said he had one teacher claim he was out to get him after this point. Stephen had a different perspective though as one of his teachers was glad and ultimately respected him for putting the heat on her.

### **How Did This Process Affect the Principal Professionally, Personally, and Politically?**

The principals were affected by this process professionally, personally, and politically. Professionally, many of the principals voiced feeling responsible over the hiring of the individual if he or she was someone they had brought on board with them at some point. They questioned their judgement because they were not right about this individual being a good fit for students. Grace shared that the wait time, or the timeline of the action plan, was the most difficult for her because the action plan did not immediately change her concern for the children sitting in that classroom. "You can't just uproot them and put them in someone else's class," she said. Change doesn't happen overnight, but she was ready to see changes and impact yesterday. Ben jokingly claimed that he got better at writing memos, writing action plans, and growing in his stick-with-it-ness to do things right through this process.

Personally, Stephen lost a lot of sleep during his work with an incompetent teacher. He would stay awake at night wondering what he was going to walk into the next day, what crazy thing the teacher would do next, who was going to complain about them again, and everything else that the principal has to deal with that surrounds this teacher. Ben said he would never forget the time he had to go sit in on a former teacher's unemployment review with the Employment Security Commission—it is never a good



feeling knowing you put someone in an unemployment line. “But,” he said, “I saved some children educationally.”

James doesn’t believe others see him as someone who is out to get rid of teachers because he simply is not in a position to be so picky. The teacher candidates for his school are slim. “I can nit-pick and give people developing in a lot of elements [on the teacher evaluation instrument] and force them to leave, but it is almost better with the devil you know than the one you don’t.” If he can’t get anyone who is quality to come to his school, he would rather coach and work with the person he has in his building. Stephen stated that, “if she were the right person in the community . . . it could have been very difficult.” Thankfully for him, the community was not buying what she was selling. His gut instinct of doing what is right no matter what, drives him, however his experience with his ineffective teacher has caused him to second guess different decisions “because you just can’t erase or forget the experience.” It was almost as if he was haunted by it. Josh felt strengthened as an administrator by the experience. It helped him know what the procedures were and what was all involved in this process. The experience left him more confident in himself as an instructional leader at his school.

### **What Effects Do the Dismissal Process Have on the Principal’s Practice?**

Brittani even said, “that at one point, I had sworn I would never do it [an action plan] again.” She said this because her frustration was so high, it was a very stressful time and a difficult ongoing task which ultimately wears the principal down. However, the experience has helped Brittani to become more proactive. She also thinks that it really made her evaluate her hiring process—she had always hired with her gut, but

sometimes they were sort of desperate. This experience gave her the “courage to wait for the right one.” This experience was also one of those big lessons in our profession—it showed her where her personal “line in the sand was.” Grace said she began to question herself because her work really pulled at her heartstrings. She asked questions such as; Am I doing what is right for this person? For these students? The human element is not an easy thing to disregard.

### **What Effects on School Climate, Culture, and Operations Do Principals Describe?**

At the end of the day, working with an ineffective teacher can impact your school climate, your culture and your daily operations. Rebecca shared that when you begin documenting and/or dismissing people, it creates an “us against them mentality.” You are still going to be made out to be the bad guy even if everyone in the building knows she is the weakest link. It would be difficult for staff to not support the teacher to their face and to some degree, this begins to diminish the trust in your building. Elena and Kay felt challenged in never being able to tell their side when this happened in their buildings. Elena remembers being confronted with people that feel like they know what’s happening and are angry or upset with you for their friend and then, you can’t say anything about it—you can’t defend yourself. Kay remembers getting a phone call about her teacher from someone in the community who wanted to inform her of what a good person her teacher was. “Folks on the outside don’t see that I cannot discuss someone else’s personnel situation with them.” For Ben, politically, outside of school, it made his life hell. He shared,

I had to put them on a plan, 'cause they were—they were committing educational malpractice. That made my life miserable. Was it what was best for children? Absolutely. Was it what was best for me politically as the principal of the school? Under no circumstances. It gave me no cover and no ability to hide or protect myself or do anything. I mean, it—politically when you put somebody on a plan, there is no cover. And if that person lives in the community or has connections to the community, they you know, and I know, that it's going to be brutal for the length of that plan, and/or afterwards.

The impact on your school can go beyond the climate and as we already know, impact the academics. Karen's teacher taught a tested content area with over 100 students under her instruction. When students were under-performing under her instructional leadership in the classroom, impacted their school report card and their school grade which are highly publicized pieces of information for our state. Copies of the school report cards are sent home with all students and a link to access it is posted on school websites at all times. That impact will quickly hurt the moral and cause parents to question the school—was this a good place to send their children to learn? Should they look at other options for their child's education?

The impact in the school building can also go beyond the staff. In a high school—students are talking about it. They tell others that they can't learn in so-and-so's classroom. As a principal, what response is given when a student tells you they can't learn in that class? Oftentimes the community is also talking about the problem. They know who the weak links are through their conversations around the water cooler. Parents go out and talk in the community and the gossip—whether truth or not, the gossip hurts your school's image.

The daily operations of a principal are interrupted in your building because meeting with, observing and documenting another teacher for a plan takes up a lot of the principal's time—time that could be spent in other classrooms, meeting in PLC groups and connecting with students. Principals need to be careful not to focus all of your energy on that one teacher or you will be hurting your building. Others might even believe you have a favorite, and will be hurt at your lack of presence in their classrooms.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Current Practice**

While our principal stories were eye-opening, one implication was mentioned by James. His teacher candidate pool is slim meaning he has difficulty staffing his building. If he moves to dismiss someone from the classroom, he is left with a classroom full of students who are in need of supervision and instruction. Is the teacher that is currently in the class better for those students than a substitute? More often than not, the answer to that question is yes. And so, like James, you may need to leave that teacher in front of those students at least until the end of the school year. The lack of qualified teacher candidates creates a problem for our principals.

Sometimes, the desire to preserve the positive climate and working relationships in your building may cause a principal to look the other way. The case study presented previously was about a teacher who had been teaching under the radar for 17 years—as terrible as the principal made him sound, he had zero documentation in his file. Were his former principals worried that word would get around that he's out to get people and no one will trust him? “Relationships, climate, and culture are important, but they are a

means to an end, not the end itself. The goal is higher levels of student learning that prepare students for future pursuits” (Hall, 2019, p. 15). Avoidance is another limitation. From the stories shared, avoidance did not seem to be a limitation for our principals and it could have easily been one for Karen whose teacher was the best friend of the Assistant Superintendent. Principals who think it is easier to just look the other way are actually making things much more difficult for themselves down the road.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Our principals need additional professional development (PD) in how to have those difficult conversations. A school district could easily embed this needed PD in their monthly meetings with administrators. Current principals could be given scenarios and role play what those conversations could look like. In addition, they could conduct learning walks together at one another’s schools and provide feedback to the sitting principal of that school. It is important to move beyond an event that rarely happens and is uncomfortable to a conversation that is natural and carries confidence with the principal.

### **Circumstances That Happen**

One major limitation is that none of our principals actually had a teacher dismissed. Ben had one that the superintendent recommended to the school board for dismissal, but the teacher ultimately resigned. Our principals either saw their teachers resign and go to a different school system or another profession altogether or, they saw their teachers improve and ultimately were weaned off of their action plans over time. It took time for everyone and changes were not always noted as completed in the course of

the minimum 90-day timeline. Stephen worked with one of his teachers off and on again for about six years. There is no magic number to the timeline, but since all of our principals desired to see improvement over dismissal, timelines were extended as they saw evidence of growth towards meeting the goals laid out for them in the action plan.

### **Implications for Future Study**

If there was a way to also interview the teachers, I believe that would really add in another layer of feedback, similar to the 360 protocols. The teachers could share how the meetings times made them feel, whether or not they felt supports, and what ultimately made the difference for them. However, knowing who the teachers are breaches confidentiality since these are all considered to be personnel issues—so this would not be possible unless the principal was able to go back and get information from the teacher.

School districts need to take the time to walk principals through the process of recognizing, identifying, and communicating with an ineffective classroom teacher. One suggestion would be to thoroughly review what both local LEA and state policy and our general statutes say about incompetence. Then, I would follow up with some data sharing from Central Office Directors about where our schools are along the continuum of mastery—this should point out the weaknesses you would have in the school buildings. Consult time with the principals at your table would be so invaluable! I would plan to have the principals share the story their data is sharing and then ask what others observe that they failed to mention. Having an outside party who is a colleague provide feedback on your data is going to be powerful for principals because it should validate what they already noticed about their data and may even point out something they had

missed. I would suggest continuing these principal consult times at each upcoming principal meeting so that everyone can begin on a path to recognizing and identifying needs together if needed. The constant principal collaboration will help to provide the professional support that one would need when needing to move forward with dismissal.

Our principal preparation programs do a great job of ensuring everyone is aware of policy updates, however, real experience is not going to come until you are out in the field and ready to chat with a teacher. One suggestion that came from this study was the need for a coaching class for future principals. *The Art of Coaching* by Elena Aguilar would be a great book study to kick off this need in a class. Another suggestion would be centered around the school leader's contribution to and the understanding of pedagogy. Beyond understanding policy, learning about the coaching cycle & pedagogy, and the need for teacher quality, and practicing with the use of case studies, principals are not in need of anything different from their graduate school course load.

Future research into the impact on students is continually needed to continue to see just how great the need really is. It would also be great to look deeper at what a classroom teacher who is highly effective looks like in the classroom—what is s/he doing that works? Can these same behaviors be replicated? What other important decisions are educational leaders having to make in order to pull their schools out of the ruts?

The power of the instructional leader in each school should never be underestimated. “As instructional leaders, we know the quality of the instruction occurring in our classrooms is the defining characteristic of our influence—and it is the determining factor of our students’ success” (Hall, 2019, p. 17). Take the time to be

transparent, honest, forthright, and prioritize what is best the principal, the school staff, and the students.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

**Interview Protocol → Professionally**

1. Tell me about a time when you were concerned about the performances of a classroom teacher.
  - a. What stood out to you?
  - b. What support if any, did you seek out?
2. What did you do?
  - a. Collaborate with who?
  - b. Plan? Time? Follow up?
3. Tell me about how you prepared to have that initial conversation with that teacher to share that concern.
  - a. HR?
  - b. C&I department?
  - c. IC?
  - d. Did you bring a plan?
4. Were there others who fueled that concern?
  - a. Parents?
  - b. Students?
  - c. Teachers?
  - d. CO staff?
5. After that initial conversation with the teacher, what did you do next?
  - a. How did you process and/ or document the conversation?
6. Tell me about the follow up process.
  - a. Who is involved?
  - b. Timeline?
  - c. How did you know when the concern no longer existed or when it was most appropriate to move in another direction?
7. Throughout this time of concern, what were you challenged by professionally in your practice?
  - a. What guidance did you seek out?
  - b. Who else did you inform supervisor wise?
8. What did you think about and protect as you planned for difficult conversations?
  - a. Time of day—goal to not disrupt instruction
9. During this time, what was your overall professional goal for this teacher? Your students? How are you involved in helping them get there?

10. Professionally, how did this concern impact your school?
11. Is there anything else you want to share about how this ineffective teacher and your involvement with him or her impacted you professionally?

**Interview Protocol → Personally**

1. Once you felt a concern over what you were observing in the classroom and the mastery level of students, what emotions were present within you?
2. How did you feel about meeting with this teacher to discuss your concerns knowing that they could become very defensive?
  - a. How did you set the tone for this meeting? What kind of tone were you trying to set?
3. What was easy about this meeting? What was difficult?
4. Were there any thoughts, perceptions, or feelings you had to push aside because being professional was first & foremost? Tell me about those.
5. Moving forward—what did you struggle and/ or wrestle with?
  - a. Time management?
  - b. Encouragement?
  - c. Positivity?
  - d. Remaining professional?
6. As your time investment proceeded—how did your feelings about this teacher and this process change if it did?
  - a. What changed?
  - b. Why do you think this happened?
7. How did you decide that you were at the point of no return with this teacher?
  - a. How long did this take?
  - b. Was there a culminating act or piece of data that brought you to this realization?
8. At what point did you have a sense as to where this improvement or lack thereof was going?
9. What were continued interactions with this teacher like?
  - a. Positive?
  - b. Negative?
  - c. Stressful?
10. How did you manage the need to vent and/ or brainstorm with a colleague and the need to main confidentiality?
  - a. Did you reach out to others?
  - b. Did you manage all of this internally?

11. Is there anything else you want to share about how this ineffective teacher and your involvement with him or her impacted you professionally?

**Interview Protocol → Politically**

1. How did you make the conscious decision that this teacher qualified as ineffective in your mind?
  - a. Did you seek out resources?
  - b. Did you side with the data?
2. What circumstances or evidence did you have that brought you to this conclusion?
  - a. At what point was enough, really enough?
3. How long did you work alongside this teacher and provide support?
  - a. Why this particular length of time?
4. What did the actual dismissal process look like?
  - a. Who was involved?
  - b. What did it entail?
  - c. What was the timeline?
5. How did the interactions and support for this teacher change once your Central Office became involved?
  - a. Was it still perceived as support?
  - b. Did the additional involvement speed things up or slow things down?
6. What about current law did you come back to and review throughout this time?
  - a. Teacher tenure law (previous law)
7. Was there ever participation by a lawyer either on the district's side or the teacher's side?
  - a. If so, how did this change the nature of this relationship?
  - b. If not, was that ever a concern?
8. After the process ended, did you note any clauses to the law that are needed?
  - a. What is missing from current law?
9. Moving forward, what would you do differently? What would you do the same?
  - a. If you had the same situation a year from now . . .
10. Is there anything else you want to share about how this ineffective teacher and your involvement with him or her impacted you politically?