

**EXPLORING THE UTILIZATION OF MISSION BY
NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:
HOW DOES MISSION DRIVE PRACTICE?**

Dissertation presented to the Faculty of
Doane University College of Education
Crete, Nebraska

In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education:

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the Utilization of Mission by Nebraska Public School Principals:

How Does Mission Drive Practice?

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Every school in Nebraska has a mission statement, but how principals use them in their daily practices is unclear. The purpose of this study was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals to lead, manage, and improve their schools. A multicase study methodology, grounded in the cross-case analysis, utilized semi-structured interviews, site observations, and examination of current documents and artifacts to develop a generalized understanding of principal practices as identified by the Nebraska Department of Education's *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (2017). Twelve public school principals from across Nebraska were selected based on the grade-levels they serve and their district's mission statement. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed through first- and second-cycle coding methods. Upon completion of the within-case analysis, cross-case analysis was performed to explore and uncover any patterns and trends in the principals' practices. Participating principals generally relied on their visions for teaching and learning, their personal philosophies, and their belief in "doing what's best for kids" to lead, manage, and improve their schools. Three of the twelve principals provided insight into practices and approaches driven by a mission statement. Their actions demonstrate that mission-driven school leadership is possible.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the giants upon whose shoulders I stand.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank and acknowledge a number of people for helping me arrive at this point. Above everyone and anyone else, I thank my wonderful partner and wife, Jennifer. She has been my inspiration, sounding board, sparring partner, and editor throughout this process. The first time our cadre met, we were asked who motivated and inspired us. Jen was my answer, and she continues to be my answer. I thank Sophie and Stella. I have been unavailable a lot throughout this process, and they have always acted like they understood why I needed to be gone.

I want to thank Arlynn O'Connor, Ken and Vicki Ippensen, Diane Shock, John Forney, and Susan Baker. When I introduce myself before presentations, I speak about education being the family business. I am a third-generation educator. My grandmother, mother, and father were all educators. Two aunts and an uncle were educators. My wife is an educator. I am proud to be a banner carrier for the family, and to make this contribution to the field.

Thank you to Dr. Marilyn Peterson, Dr. Doug Christensen, and Dr. Lori Nebelsick-Gullet for being a part of this process with me. Your guidance and support led me to this point. Marilyn, thank you for partnering with me in this journey. Who knew we would navigate a pandemic as part of the process?

To the twelve participants, thank you for your willingness and openness to discuss these topics. Each of you provided insight into the motivation behind your decisions and actions. You even hung in there when I began asking questions that you were not prepared for. None of this could have happened without your willingness and openness.

As I began considering this journey, Curtis Cogswell pushed me to jump in. Curtis, thank you for always believing in me and believing I am capable of great things.

All of my graduate-level education prior to beginning this program was online. I did not make lasting friendships in those programs. In the Doane doctoral program, I did. Thank you to my partners in this journey: John Meyer, Carli Anderson, and Jamar Dorsey. You each provided me fantastic feedback and discussion along the way. What could have been a very lonely process was not because of you.

Thank you to the teachers and administrators who served as intellectual sparring partners throughout this doctoral journey. You helped me refine my thoughts and remember why I am doing this. Your support will always be appreciated.

Finally, thank you to the teachers, professors, and all the others who have influenced me on my educational journey. From our personal interactions and conversations, to reading the words you have written, you have lifted me up and helped me to see the possibilities that lie ahead.

Thank you to each and every one of you, you are my giants.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Why	1
Why and Mission Statements.....	3
Purpose Statement with Research Question and Sub-Questions	12
Definitions.....	16
Study Significance	18
Chapter 2: Literature Review	20
Rationale	20
The Responsibilities of Principals	20
Mission Statements	29
Connections Between the Concepts.....	38
Summary and Conclusion	48
Chapter 3: Methodology	50
Characteristics of Qualitative Research	50
Research Approach	51
Role of the Researcher	54
Personal Philosophy	57
Personal Biases and Expectations	60
Participant Selection	65
Data Collection Procedures.....	71
Pilot Interview.....	74
Data Analysis Procedures	76

Data Verification Procedures	80
Ethical Considerations	85
Chapter 4: Findings.....	88
Introduction of Participants.....	88
Case Study #1 - Dr. Susan Jones, John Adams Elementary School	90
Case Study #2 - Mr. Josh Connor, John Adams Middle School.....	100
Case Study #3 - Dr. Steve Hawthorne, John Adams High School	111
Case Study #4 - Mrs. Julie Maddox, Harry Truman Elementary School	123
Case Study #5 - Mr. William Brown, Harry Truman High School	133
Case Study #6 - Mr. Ryan Gordon, James Monroe Public School.....	143
Case Study #7 - Ms. Emily Franklin, Thomas Jefferson Elementary School....	153
Case Study #8 - Mr. Matthew Carter, Thomas Jefferson Middle School.....	164
Case Study #9 - Mr. Michael Wilson, Thomas Jefferson High School	175
Case Study #10 - Mr. Cory Mills, Calvin Coolidge Elementary School	185
Case Study #11 - Mr. Russ Campbell, Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School....	196
Case Study #12 - Ms. Michelle Richards, James Madison Public Schools	207
Cross-Case Analysis	218
Summary	226
Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations	227
Summary	227
Findings.....	230
Potential Limitations of the Study	242
Recommendations.....	243

Final Thoughts	248
References.....	250
Appedices.....	258
Appendix A: Confirmation Letter.....	258
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form	259
Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet.....	261
Appendix D: List of Materials Requested	262
Appendix E: Interview Protocol for Participants.....	263
Appendix F: Site Observation Protocol	269
Appendix G: Evidence Analysis Protocol	270
Appendix H: Findings Review Form	274
Appendix I: Data Collection Matrix	275
Appendix J: Extrenal Review Letter.....	276

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Collected Practices of an Effective Principal	23
Table 2: Number of Eligible School Districts.....	70
Table 3: Mission Statement Alignment and Principals' Responsibilities.....	237
Table 4: Mission Statement Knowledge	240
Table 5: Mission Statement Inclusion and Utilization.....	241

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this multicase study was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. Mission statements clearly articulate the purpose of an organization (Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Pearce, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007) and are essential in the school improvement process (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012).

Great organizations use their mission statements to guide and drive their decisions and actions (Collins, 2001; Collins 2005). When an organization's mission informs its processes, purpose guides action. Very few organizations, however, can state the purpose for their actions (Sinek, 2009; Collins, 2005). To determine a clear purpose, an organization must ask and answer why they exist.

Why

Why? The question, asked by learners and problem-solvers of all ages, is a common one, though not as common as it should be (Berger, 2014). David Cooperrider (Berger, 2014), a professor at Case Western University, illustrates the importance of asking why. "Organizations gravitate toward the questions they ask" (p. 19), and if an organization uses questions to problem solve, as Berger (2014) encourages, those questions will need to be translated into actions. The simple, but powerful, question why can lead to a logical progression of questions for problem solving: Why, What if, and How (Berger, 2014). Simon Sinek believes there is a different order for these questions as

the problem solver moves from asking questions to providing solutions. His process, though different, also starts with why.

According to Sinek (2009), very few companies can clearly state why they do what they do. Why is a powerful and important question for every business to answer, because in the grand scheme of things, why lies at the center of success (Sinek, 2009). The answer to the question why should guide the decisions and actions of individuals and organizations.

If an entity—a person, a team, or an organization—starts with why, why can lead to how. Entities accomplish their goals through their how, through doing little things right (Walsh, Jamison, & Walsh, 2009; Wooden & Jamison, 2004). How requires discipline (Sinek, 2009): disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action (Collins, 2001). How, to an entity, may be referring to the processes they use, or even their unique selling points. How refers to what makes one thing better than the other (Sinek, 2009). When you start with why, and move through how, why leads to what. What refers to the specific actions taken by an entity.

When an entity's purpose informs its processes, the purpose guides action. Put simply, why leads to what (Sinek, 2009). Most conversations by entities—people, teams, organizations—start with what. They talk about what they do and what they offer, sometimes they discuss how they do it, but they rarely discuss why they do what they do (Sinek, 2009). Sinek describes mission-driven entities as inspired, and these entities are different. Inspired entities start with why, identify the best practices to determine how to achieve their purpose, and then decide what actions they will choose while being guided by—driven by—their purpose. Inspired individuals, guided by why, act with the

conviction of knowing their purpose; inspired teams act with the knowledge that success lies in their actions; and inspired organizations act with the understanding that their actions mean something. The inspired entity is driven by purpose; the inspired entity starts with why (Sinek, 2009; Drucker, 2001). Starting with why and being guided by purpose is a route forward for people, teams, and organizations in their search for achieving success.

People, teams, and organizations can fall prey to the mundane, to situations where the focus is on the activity, not the purpose of the activity. John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 2009), in a preseason letter to his 1972-1973 UCLA basketball team, challenged his team to remember, “The work you do each and every day is the only true way to improve and prepare yourself for what is to come” (p. 200). Wooden challenged his team to focus on the why behind the work, not the work itself. In doing so, he was able to keep his players from mistaking activity for achievement. For activity to lead to achievement, it needs to be done for a reason, it needs to be guided by why.

Why and Mission Statements

Organizations of all types attempt to answer the question of why with mission statements; in fact, defining an organization’s purpose is the primary reason for having a mission statement (Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Pearce, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). But simply having a mission statement, and actually using it to guide an organization’s actions are different matters. In some cases, managers do not use the mission statement because the statement is unrealistic, unclear, unsatisfying, inappropriate, ineffective, or even foreign (Bart,

1997b). In other cases, organizational mission statements are unused because they generate cynicism, undermine the authority of leadership, or are unreadable and uninspiring (Campbell & Yeung, 1991). This is not always the case, nor does it need to be. Nonprofit and social sector organizations are among some of the best at having and utilizing their mission statements, and many have come to refer to themselves as “mission-driven” organizations, as the terms “not-for-profit” and “private” mean nothing regarding what the organization is or does.

Peter Drucker identifies nonprofit organizations as “America’s management leaders” (2001, p. 88), and they have earned this recognition by starting with a clearly defined mission. Unlike traditional for-profit businesses that focus on financial performance, nonprofit and social-sector organizations plan and begin their work focused on the achievement of their mission (Collins, 2005; Drucker, 2001). In the social-sector companion to *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2005) agrees with Drucker’s insight into the measurement of performance and success: In the social-sector organization, performance is measured “relative to mission, not financial returns” (p. 5). There are various types of organizations operating in the nonprofit/social-sector, but of all these organizations, schools are a special, specific type of social-sector organization.

Schools, however, are different. Because they are funded by taxpayer dollars, schools operate differently than most traditional nonprofit and social-sector organizations. Unlike other nonprofit or social sector organizations, schools are established by statutory or constitutional legal authority. In Nebraska, the state government is to “provide for the free instruction in the common schools... of all persons between the ages of five and twenty-one years” (Nebraska Legislature, 2017, p. 41), and

as specified in Article VII of the Nebraska State Constitution (Nebraska Legislature, 2017), funding is provided to operate and maintain public schools. This source of funding is a significant difference between public schools and other nonprofit and social sector organizations. Despite this difference in funding, public schools are similar to other nonprofit and social-sector organizations in an important way: Individual districts and schools have mission statements that define their purpose. These mission statements are required by the continuous school improvement and accreditation processes (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Advance Education, 2017a; Advance Education, 2017b), and should be used by principals to lead, manage, and improve their schools.

The responsibilities of principals have been discussed in numerous commercial and scholarly texts, with a wide range of responsibilities being identified. Principal responsibilities include: leading and managing professional development; managing resources; developing and enforcing rules, expectations, norms, and policies; connecting the school with external stakeholders and community; building an effective culture; overseeing curriculum, instruction, and assessment; building an equitable, high-character system; communicating with internal and external stakeholders; and focusing on results (Brill, 2008; McEwan, 2003; O'Day, Goertz, & Floden, 1995; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2007; Neumann & Simmons, 2001; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). The state of Nebraska has produced its own list of eight responsibilities: establishing and communicating a vision for learning; developing relationships; leading continuous school improvement; providing instructional leadership; building a professional community; managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school; creating a school culture; and acting with fairness, integrity, and professionalism (Nebraska Department of Education,

2017). This list of responsibilities closely aligns with those identified in the literature. These responsibilities, whether from legal authority, commercial and scholarly literature or from the Nebraska Department of Education, align nicely with Kotter's (2012) definitions of leadership, management, and change.

Kotter (2012) defines leadership as "a set of processes that creates organizations... or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles" (p. 28). Management is defined by Kotter (2012) as "a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly" (p. 28) and includes "planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving" (p. 28). Kotter's (2012) change process aligns closely with the continuous school improvement process provided by the Nebraska Department of Education (2012) and required for school accreditation.

Mission statements should provide the context for these decisions, guiding the actions of principals (Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Pearce, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007; Atrill, Omran, & Pointon, 2005). While this should be the case, questions regarding real-world practice remain: As principals perform their duties of leading, managing, and improving their schools, are they utilizing the school mission for context and guidance to make decisions and take action? Are they setting goals that will help the school achieve its mission?

The goals of an organization should be tied directly to the mission statement, with objectives derived from the goals individually or collectively (Peterson & Jaret, 2001),

and leadership, management, and improvement activities should be undertaken to meet these goals and objectives. In successful nonprofit and social-sector organizations, mission drives and guides decision-making and action. Principals who desire to lead a successful school should be acting in concert with the school mission statement to make decisions, to guide actions, and to drive the organization like other successful nonprofit and social-sector organizations, but are they? How are principals utilizing the school mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools? The answer to this question is unclear, and that lack of clarity poses a problem.

Resolving the lack of clarity regarding the utilization of mission statements in the practices of principals is important to a number of people and groups of people. Primarily, it is important to the principals themselves. Principals are asked to lead and manage their schools, they are asked to improve their schools through the continuous improvement process, and they are asked to set and achieve goals. When a principal can align the goals set, the decisions made, and the actions taken with the purpose of the school, and can clearly communicate this to the superintendent, board of education, teachers, students, student parents and guardians, and community members, the school should be deemed successful if the goals are met.

Principals can utilize the school mission statement to communicate intention and purpose as decisions are made and actions are taken. The school mission statement can provide context for messages to internal and external stakeholders and for the development of the school culture and climate. For a school principal whose leadership, management, and improvement practices are aligned with the purpose of the organization, the mission statement is an effective and invaluable communication tool.

How principals communicate, and what they communicate, will be of interest to many audiences.

Superintendents have dual interests in understanding whether principals are utilizing their mission statement to guide and drive their decisions and actions. First, the superintendent, as the chief executive officer of the school system, is the primary evaluator of the principal and is responsible for determining the principal's effectiveness in leading the school. Knowing the methods by which a principal is making decisions and taking actions will help in this evaluation process because the superintendent can determine if the principal is effectively setting and reaching leadership goals. Secondly, the superintendent leads the district and if each school within the district is working with a singular purpose toward achieving its mission, then the district as a whole should be on the way to achieving its purpose.

Boards of education will benefit from the results of this study. Boards of education are representatives of the public, and only occasionally trained as educators. The language, process, and measurements of education are jargon-filled and complex and often need to be explained to non-educators. Mission statements, though, are often written in language that is aimed at outside audiences, including non-educators. If the board of education knows the principal is working toward achieving goals and objectives derived from the school's mission, they will have a clearer context for understanding progress, improvement, and even test scores.

Teachers will benefit from a deeper understanding of the decision-making process of principals. Teachers report to principals, and they deserve to know how and why their principals are making choices and decisions which will directly affect them. As the stated

purpose of the school, the mission statement should be available to principals and teachers alike to create a common language for decision making. The actions of principals and teachers should come from the direction provided by the mission statement. However, if one side, or both sides, is not using it, the common language created by the mission falls apart, coherence is lost, and individuals will revert to doing things the way they did prior to the creation of a mission-based common language for decision making.

Students and parents will benefit from the results of this study. Education is often viewed as something done to students, or for students, with little explanation of why. If students can understand why their education is crafted in the way it is and can understand why their education is important to them as individuals, they become partners in the process, not just subjects. Parents and guardians of public school students give those schools and principals responsibility for educating their students. When a school is led by a principal who can clearly articulate and demonstrate the utilization of the school's mission, parents and guardians can be assured of the purpose of the student's education, of the alignment between the school's work and the student's work, and of the rationale for the choices made throughout the educational process.

At the same time, the public school is a major investment for states and communities, and schools can influence the community's housing, job, and commercial markets. A school that is continually striving to achieve its purpose, regardless of test scores, is one that is striving to achieve goals approved by the school board members, representatives of the community; a principal who is doing this, is one who is working to meet the needs of the community.

Finally, principal preparation programs should be interested in the results of this study. As they prepare the next generations of principals, they have the power to influence the way principals perform their work. If principal preparation programs see the value of a school led by a mission-driven principal, they can teach principals how to use school mission statements to lead, manage, and improve their schools.

Current scholarly research supports four common uses of an organization's mission statement:

- To state the purpose of an organization (Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Pearce, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007),
- To guide action (Atrill, Omran, & Pointon, 2005; Bart, 1997b, Campbell, 1997; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Pearce, 1982; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007),
- To motivate and inspire employees (Conger, 1991; Bart, 1997b), and
- To identify those who benefit from the actions of an organization (Bart, 1997b; Hutton & Phillips, 2001).

These mission statement applications align with the responsibilities of the principal, and as stated above, can be used both as context for decisions and actions and to communicate those decisions and actions as the principal leads, manages, and improves the school.

The school mission statement is a key component in the continuous improvement process (Boerma, 2006; Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Gurley, Peters,

Collins, & Fifolt, 2015; Advance Education, 2017a; Advance Education, 2017b). When the school mission statement is at the center of the school improvement process, it provides context for the governance of, decision making in, and management of the school (Boerma, 2006). Additionally, it can become the guiding force behind curriculum, programs, pedagogy, evaluation, architecture, interior design, hiring, and hard-to-describe cultural components (House & Sears, 2002; Pekarsky, 2007). For the school mission statement to guide and drive decisions and actions, it must be utilized; and knowing how it is being utilized can be a challenge.

Without being specifically told, it is impossible to know the processes and factors being considered by a principal. These processes and factors exist unseen, inside a black box (Schwartz, 2001) that lies between what people know they should do, or have been told to do, and what they actually do. Schwartz (2001) discovered this black box as part of his ethical behavior research, and Wiggins and McTighe (2007) support the concept of the black box, though not directly addressing it, when they discuss the connection between mission, actions, and outcomes. Because it is difficult and potentially invasive to understand what the decision maker is thinking or considering during the decision-making process, most researchers have not explored this part of the process.

Existing literature attempts to connect school mission statements and school performance, but rarely investigates the decisions and actions of the principal. Instead, they investigate a correlation between mission and outcomes (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Bart & Baetz, 1998; Weiss & Piderit, 1999; Davis, Ruhe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2007; Alegre, Berbegal-Mirabent, Guerrero, & Mas-Machuca, 2018). Wiggins and McTighe (2007) challenge all educators, including principals, to ask the question, “If this is our mission,

then what would it look like in practice?” (p. 23).

This study provides insight into the use of the school’s mission statement and the practices of principals in the state of Nebraska. It shines a light into the black box (Schwartz, 2001) that exists between the mission statement and the outcomes of a school and hides the decisions and actions of the principal to provide insight into the choices being made and the factors driving those choices. With the continually increasing scrutiny placed on schools—on what they do and how they do it—and the general lack of clarity in understanding how principals use their school’s mission statement in their work, this study provides connections between what principals do, how they do it, and, most importantly, why they do it.

Purpose Statement with Research Question and Sub-Questions

Every school in Nebraska is required to have a mission statement for accreditation, but it is unclear how principals use their school’s mission statement in their daily practices. The purpose of this multicase study was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. In order to better understand how principals use their mission statements, twelve principals were purposefully selected using specific criteria. Information was collected regarding their leadership, management, and improvement practices through semi-structured interviews, site observations, and examination of current documents and artifacts.

At the core of this multicase study was one central question: How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools? Eight sub-questions, built upon the eight effective practices of

principals from the *Teacher & Principal Performance Framework* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017), framed the interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis in order to explore, identify, and describe:

- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's vision for teaching and learning;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's development of relationships with students, staff, families, and the community;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the school's continuous improvement process;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's efforts to create an effective school culture; and
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's interpretation and implementation of local, state, and national educational policies.

Inspired by Wiggins and McTighe (2007) and Collins (2005), one specific sub-question, with follow-ups possible, was asked: How does the principal know if the school has achieved its mission?

Questions were answered through a series of semi-structured interviews with purposefully-selected principals, site observations, and evidence analysis. One interview was held with each principal at their school. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked about their leadership, management, and improvement practices within the context of the *Teacher & Principal Performance Framework* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). These questions were clustered around eight practices: establishing and communicating a vision for learning; developing relationships; leading continuous school improvement; providing instructional leadership; building a professional community; managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school; creating a school culture; and acting with fairness, integrity, and professionalism (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). In part two, the researcher asked the participant two mission-specific questions about each of the identified practices: 1) How does the mission of the school guide and inform your practices? and 2) How do your practices help achieve the school's mission?

Site observations occurred following the interviews. This consisted of an observation of the principal's office and a walk-through of the building, classrooms, and other public spaces. Within the process, the principal researcher recorded if the mission was posted throughout the school. If it was posted, evidence of how the mission was displayed in these locations was collected. This data supplemented the responses provided by principals during the interview, specifically those related to communication, relationship building, and culture building.

In addition to the interviews and observations, items, especially documents, relative to mission utilization and communication were collected. For each item

requested, the document was reviewed, the utilization of the mission within the document was recorded, and specific examples were identified. The documents requested were: student and faculty handbooks, school letterhead, certified and classified staff evaluation tools, instructional models, mentoring programs, materials used for the most recent school improvement visit, current school improvement cycle plan and materials, questions used during hiring, building resource usage and improvement planning documents, culture/climate assessment tools, and curriculum guides/course catalogs.

Twelve participants were selected according to four criteria: 1) the kind of mission statement of the school, 2) the grade levels served by the principal, 3) the geographic location of the principal's school, and 4) the tenure of the principal. All school districts, as part of the accreditation process requirements must have mission statements. Individual schools may adopt the district's mission statement or create their own. Participants in this study were chosen from schools following the district mission statement, though upon interviewing the principals, two principals had adopted building mission statements. For the purpose of this study and participant selection, a comprehensive mission statement is one which is composed of a list of three or more specific items or actions to be accomplished. An example of a comprehensive mission statement is: to work collaboratively to prepare students to be productive, responsible citizens through effective instruction in a safe, caring, supportive learning environment. A concise mission statement, for the purpose of this study and participant selection, is one which is composed of one or two specific items or actions to be accomplished. An example of a concise mission statement is: to prepare students to be productive, responsible citizens. Of the twelve participants, six were from districts with

comprehensive mission statements, and six were from districts with concise mission statements. The twelve participating principals varied by grade level: Two principals were selected who serve in K-12 or PK-12 schools; two elementary and two high school principals who serve in districts with elementary and secondary schools; and two elementary, two middle school, and two high school principals from districts with elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. At each school level, one of the principals selected serves at a school with a comprehensive mission statement, and the other principal serves at a school with a concise mission statement. In order to get maximum variation in the participants selected, an attempt was made to select school districts from each of the six Nebraska School Activities Association (NSAA) legislative districts in the state of Nebraska (Nebraska School Activities Association, n.d.). One NSAA legislative district was not represented. All twelve principals have served in their current principalship for at least three full years.

Definitions

The essential work of principals as identified by the Nebraska Department of Education (2017) can be distilled into three general practice categories: leadership, management (Kotter, 2012), and improvement (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012). For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined as described:

- Utilization: Utilization is defined as the practical use of something. In this study, mission statement utilization will be defined as the practical use of the mission statement to guide decision-making and action-taking processes as part of the principal's leadership, management, and improvement practices.

- Leadership Practices: Practices which build systems or transform old ones to achieve goals or purpose (Kotter, 2012).
- Management Practices: Practices which make systems work more efficiently and effectively (Kotter, 2012).
- Improvement Practices: Improvement is a multi-step process to identify, plan for, and implement purposeful change spurred by the identification of a difference between where the organization currently is, and where it wants to be (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Jones & George, 2016; Kotler & Scheff, 1997). When formalized, this is known as the continuous school improvement process and is part of the accreditation process as required by Rule 10 of the Nebraska Department of Education (2012). Improvement practices can, and do, occur outside of the formal continuous school improvement process.
- Schools: In this study, schools are being referred to as social-sector organizations, not as the brick and mortar buildings within which the organizations exist. (Collins, 2005)
- Effective School Culture: School culture is composed of the norms, beliefs, values, assumptions and attitudes shared by members of the school (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Wiggins and McTighe, 2007). An effective school culture is one in which the norms, beliefs, values, assumptions, and attitudes are focused on the organization's mission and achieving mission-related goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007).
- Hedgehog Concept: An organization's hedgehog concept is a "crystalline concept" (Collins, 2001, p. 95) that guides all of an organization's efforts, and it is

formed by understanding three things: “1) What can you be the best in the world at?... 2) What drives your economic engine?... 3) What are you deeply passionate about?” (Collins, 2001, p. 95-96). While this concept is different than a mission statement, its importance to an organization is similar.

- Black Box: The black box, inspired by Schwartz’s (2001) study on codes of ethics and behavior, is the place where thoughts turn to action, where decisions are made. In this study, it is what lies between the mission statement, and an individual’s actions.

Study Significance

This research is necessary and useful in a number of ways. This study provides insight into the practices of participating principals in regard to their utilization of their school mission statement as they make decisions and take action in their roles as principals. It shines a light into the black box hiding those decisions and actions. It uncovers the level to which these principals are mission-driven in their practice. In the current environment of the pursuit of effective schools, utilizing the school mission—being mission-driven—is a worthy goal. Current scholarly literature does not address the decisions and actions of principals in relation to school mission statements.

Overwhelmingly, the literature addresses the composition of mission statements and uses assessment scores to find a correlation between the two. While there is value in these studies, there is only value if it is known why and how the decisions were made and the actions taken in the educational process that led to those outcomes. This study addresses the use of the mission statement within the educational process by principals. If the mission statement is an afterthought in the leadership, management, and improvement

efforts of these principals, then there is a disconnect between those efforts and the purpose of the school.

If there is a disconnect, schools will struggle to consistently achieve their mission. This does not mean they are bad schools, poor schools, or low-achieving schools; it means they are not achieving their purpose. They may even be high achieving schools, with good test scores, and high graduation rates, but if schools are not achieving their mission, they may be doing good work, outstanding work even, but they are not great schools (Collins, 2012); for a school to be great, its “performance must be assessed relative to mission” (p. 5), not test scores or graduation rates. If there is a disconnect between the stated purpose of the school and the practices of the principal, it means that other factors have been given more emphasis in decision making than the purpose of the organization.

There is a lack of clarity in understanding the connection between the school’s mission and what principals do, how they do it, and why they do it. A black box (Schwartz, 2001) exists, masking the factors affecting the choices and decisions of the principal. This study was intended to shine light into the black box, to illuminate the factors affecting the principal’s decisions and actions, and to highlight the ways mission is, and can be, a driving force in daily practice. Schools have mission statements, but how are principals using them?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Rationale

The principal's work is the work of leadership, it is the work of management, and it is the work of improvement. It is a collection of purposeful change efforts intended to help a school achieve its goals. Nebraska's public school principals have been provided a framework for their efforts, which outlines the eight effective practices of principals. These practices can be sorted into those of school leadership, management, and improvement. Underlying all of this work, and providing a context for all of the principal's decisions, is the school's mission statement.

This review of literature is intended to help the reader more fully understand the responsibilities of principals in Nebraska's public schools; leadership, management, and change; and mission statements; and to more fully understand the connections between each of these elements. When those relationships are viewed together, the importance of answering the question, "How are Nebraska public school principals utilizing their mission statements?" becomes clear.

The Responsibilities of Principals

Exploring the roles and responsibilities of principals could be a study unto itself. In fact, a number of studies have been published discussing just this. In *Learning and Leading*, Brill (2008) presents four roles the school leader must fill: enforcer, systems builder, equity promoter, and instructional leader. He also adds, as a combination of these roles: principal decision maker, human pincushion, and superhero. In *10 Traits of Highly Effective Principals*, McEwan (2003) provides ten traits, or qualities, an effective principal should have and the roles they must fill. They are: communicator, educator,

envisioner, facilitator, change master, culture builder, activator, producer, character builder, and contributor. There is a great deal of overlap between the lists provided by Brill (2008) and McEwan (2003). These texts are supported by interviews of and examples from effective principals, discussing the strategies and approaches that led to significant growth and change in their schools. But, one principal cannot simply copy the efforts of another principal; they must be true to themselves, their people, and their profession, and learn how to be the most effective principal they can be. Brill's and McEwan's work are supported, and supplemented, by O'Day, Goertz, and Floden (1995) who include the principal's importance in efforts to build teacher capacity, develop organizational capacity, and manage resources. O'Day et al. (1995) also discuss how the reform process - the continuous school improvement process - can be used to increase and build teacher and organizational capacity.

Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2007) further support this notion by providing a detailed explanation of the roles and responsibilities of a principal, which include: creating a vision of leadership and learning, developing a positive school culture, managing the organization, and interacting with the external school environment. Neumann and Simmons (2001) discuss, among other responsibilities of effective school leaders, the importance of distributing responsibility and allowing others to take part in numerous roles and responsibilities of a principal. But, sharing responsibility for a task does not mean it is abdicated. It means that the principal is responsible for the decisions of others, and that requires training, development, and communication - all different responsibilities of the principal. *Schooling By Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007)

identifies six school leadership responsibilities: mission and learning principles; curriculum; results; personnel; structures, policies, and resources; and culture.

Collectively, these lists of responsibilities of principals and school leaders have a great deal of overlap, as evidenced in Table 1. Upon analysis, these authors provide a fairly comprehensive list of the responsibilities of an effective principal. When considered and placed in a format to provide similar statements (Table 1), this common list would include:

- Lead and manage professional growth and development
- Manage resources: Time, personnel, and materials
- Develop and enforce rules, expectations, norms, and policies
- Connect the school with external stakeholders and community
- Build an effective culture
- Oversee curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- Build an equitable, high-character system
- Have and pursue a vision and mission
- Communicate with internal and external stakeholders
- Focus on results

The state of Nebraska, though, has produced its own, specific list of effective principal practices, and these responsibilities are a close reflection of the list above.

In the Nebraska Department of Education's *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (2017), the eight practices of effective principals are to: establish and communicate a vision for learning; develop relationships; lead continuous school improvement; provide instructional leadership; build a professional community; manage

Table 1*Collected Practices of an Effective Principal*

Author	Practices of an Effective Principal
Brill (2008)	Support the culture of the school by enforcing the rules, policies, norms, values, and expectations for behavior by students, teachers, and parents Manage and build the facility, financial, personnel, instructional, and belief systems and structures of the school; Establish and promote a system that is fair and just for all students; and Align the school to ensure all students receive a high-quality curriculum, assessment, and instruction.
McEwan (2003)	Actively and effectively communicate with small and large groups of stakeholders; Continually search for and encourage the implementation of improvements in curriculum, instruction, and learning for all stakeholders; Focus on achieving a vision, guided by mission; Build productive and collaborative relationships with individuals for the benefit of the students and school; Motivate the growth and development of people and systems from what they are to what they can be; Establish and communicate a vision for the future aligned to shared beliefs, expectations, and goals; Motivate and inspire others to action; Focus on accountability, results, and achievement; Model high character through values, words, and deeds; and Contribute to the success of others.
O'Day, Goertz, and Floden (1995)	Encourage the development and deepening of teachers' content knowledge; Provide opportunities for teachers to improve their instructional strategies; Encourage positive attitudes toward subject matter and profession; Help teachers develop positive self-perceptions of their teaching; Articulate and pursue a shared vision; Develop a culture focused on reflection and improvement; Use professional development to build teacher and organizational capacity; Clarify and simplify governance and organizational structures; Manage the resources of the organization; Provide instructional guidance; Establish evaluation and accountability mechanisms; and Increase public engagement and capacity.
Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2007)	Create a culture of Leadership and Learning; Develop a positive school culture; Manage the organization; and Interact with the external school environment.
Neumann and Simmons (2001)	Develop a shared vision; Determine clear priorities; Promote continuous professional learning; Link schools to community assets; Provide a strong accountability system; Reorganize the school/district structure; and Distribute these leadership responsibilities.
Wiggins and McTighe (2007)	Mission and learning principles; Curriculum; Results; Personnel; Structure, policies, and resources; Culture.

the organization, operations, and resources of the school; create a school culture; and act with fairness, integrity, and professionalism. These are broad responsibilities, and to address these responsibilities effectively, principals should be able to answer questions generated from them:

- What is your vision of teaching and learning?
- How do you develop relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?
- How do you plan for and lead continuous school improvement?
- What are the factors influencing the direction of your programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?
- How do you plan for the development of the whole staff and the individual staff members in your school?
- How do you manage the organization, operations, and resources of your school?
- How would you describe the culture of your school?
- What effect do local, state, and national educational policies have on your school?

These practices, as they have been provided by the Nebraska Department of Education (2017), should be deemed the key responsibilities of all public-school principals in the state of Nebraska. These practices are common for principals and encompass leadership, management, and change practices.

Leadership, Management, and Change

Though the words leadership and management are often used interchangeably (Marion & Gonzales, 2014), the roles are “simply different” (Buckingham & Coffman, 2014, p. 63). The difference, according to Buckingham and Coffman (2014), between

great leadership and great management is a matter of focus: A great leader's focus is outward, on the future of the organization and the route forward; a great manager's focus is inward on the individuals, and in turn, the individual actions of the organization. Kotter (2012) describes leadership as building or transforming systems, and management as making systems work, and both can lead to change. To Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2010), leadership is setting goals, and management is putting the pieces in place to achieve the goals. Marion and Gonzales (2014) describe leadership and management in terms of territory: "Leadership explores new territory; management exploits existing territory" (p. 11). Kotter (2012), extends the territory metaphor, stating, "Management makes a system work. It helps you do what you know how to do. Leadership builds systems or transforms old ones. It takes you into territory that is new and less well known, or completely unknown to you" (p. vii). Kotter (2012) believes management's responsibilities include planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem solving, while leadership's responsibilities include the processes that create organizations, direct them into the future, and inspire change. Clearly, the relationship between leadership and management is complex.

While leadership and management are clearly different, they can also be described as overlapping concepts and actions (Bush, 2007). Cuban (1988) describes the two concepts in terms of actions: "Leaders are people who shape goals, motivations, and actions of others" (p. xx), they initiate change in order to reach new and existing goals, and "occasionally, they lead... to preserve what is valuable" (p. xx). Managers maintain efficient and effective organizational arrangements, directed "toward maintenance rather than change" (Cuban, 1988, p. xx). Leadership and management must be given "equal

prominence if schools are to operate effectively and achieve their goals" (Bush, 2007, p. 392). Bolman and Deal (2008) support this argument, believing: "Leaders and managers are different, but they're equally important.... The challenges of modern organizations require the objective perspective of managers as well as the brilliant flashes of vision that wise leadership provides" (p. viii). The challenge for principals, then, is not in determining when one is leading and when one is managing, but in utilizing both leadership and management strategies and displaying both types of behavior (Leithwood, 1994). In this way, leadership and management are both complementary and competing concepts that overlap and pave the way for decisions and actions intended to serve the best interests of the school and its stakeholders (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Bush, 2007). Leadership and management, defined by actions, can either lead to or stem the tide against change.

In schools, change efforts are often undertaken as part of the school improvement process which begins with analyzing internal and external data and hearing from stakeholders to identify the need for change (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Hutton & Phillips, 2001). Identifying the need for organizational change requires an individual to recognize the difference between where the organization is and where it wants to be. It requires an organization to go through a multistep process to identify and plan for the change (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Jones & George, 2016; Kotler & Scheff, 1997). Once the need for change has been identified, and the desired outcomes for the change process have been identified, the next step is to plan "how to get there" (Saxena, 2009, p. 2).

Jones and George (2016) describe the planning process as one used to “identify and select appropriate goals and courses of action for an organization” (p. 217). Planning requires a vision to work toward, one to strive for (Mintzberg, 1994), and then breaking that vision down and identifying the details and actions - the little things - needed to transform a plan into results. As a large part of his coaching philosophy, Bill Walsh (Walsh, Jamison, & Walsh, 2009) emphasized the importance of doing the little things right and felt that by taking care of the little things, the score would take care of itself. John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 2004) believed doing little things well was one of the great secrets to success. These little things are the specifics in planning for change. There is a step beyond planning for change, though, and it is implementing the plan (Kotler and Scheff, 1997), or doing the little things. When it came to both planning for and implementing change, Bill Walsh knew what to do.

Walsh didn’t believe in declaring victory as his prime directive. His main focus was on instilling the proper attitudes and competencies needed to achieve victory. Those were his objectives, the way he would know if his team was on the path toward success (Walsh, Jamison, & Walsh, 2009). He knew that if he focused on, and took care of, the little things, success would be imminent. This included a focus on teaching disciplined and appropriate actions, thoughts, and standards for performance which he applied to all areas of the organization. Similarly, Jim Collins (2001) learned that through a culture of discipline—disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action—companies could move from being good to being great. In both of these cases, leaders and managers within a system identified where they wanted to go, analyzed where they were, and made plans and took action to close the distance between the two.

A similar process is identified for schools in *The Nebraska Framework: A Handbook for Continuous Improvement in Nebraska Schools* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012). Once goals are set, actions have been researched, and plans have been made, implementation is undertaken. Implementation requires leadership.

Kotter (2012) provides eight steps to leading change which must be taken in order, though some may need to happen concurrently. This requires a level of discipline that many unsuccessful managers and leaders do not possess. The eight steps, in order are: 1) Establish a sense of urgency, 2) Create a guiding coalition, 3) Develop a vision and strategy, 4) Communicate the change vision, 5) Empower broad-based action, 6) Generate short-term wins, 7) Consolidate gains and produce more change, and 8) Anchor new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 2012). An organization that can do this can successfully implement change. Schools are expected to monitor that implementation and then determine the effectiveness of those changes as part of their school improvement process.

Successfully implementing change is a process. When viewed through the lens provided by Simon Sinek, this process looks different. To Sinek (2009), the questions of what we do, and how we do it are secondary; the primary question is “Why?” Why do we do what we do? To Sinek (2009), great leaders embody the purpose of an organization. They know why to take an action long before they address how to take action, and long before they know what the action will be. They engage in a discussion of purpose long before they discuss change. Management decisions, too, are determined through this view into the organization, rather than as a reaction to outside forces. “Every instruction we give, every course of action we set, every result we desire, starts with the same thing: a

decision" (Sinek, 2009, p. 15). But, Sinek continues, to be effective and successful over the long-term, people need not start with what they will do, nor how they will do it; they need to start with, and focus on, why.

Mission Statements

The question of why an organization exists is answered by the mission statement. (Hutton & Phillips, 2001). This though, has not always been understood, nor have mission statements always been viewed as meaning- or context-giving. The mission statement, and its purpose, have evolved over time, from one of listing a company's objectives (Bart, 1997a) to one of meaning-giving (Pekarsky, 2007). To fully appreciate the current role of mission statements in an organization - in a school - it is imperative to study their purpose, how they are developed, and how they can be utilized.

The Purpose of Mission Statements

Mission statements are commonly understood to state the purpose of an organization (Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Pearce, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Beyond identifying the purpose of an organization, to guide action (Atrill, Omran, & Pointon, 2005; Bart, 1997b, Campbell, 1997; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Pearce, 1982; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007) is the next most commonly identified purpose of mission statements. Two other, related purposes were identified: to motivate and inspire employees (Conger, 1991; Bart, 1997b) and to identify those who benefit from the actions of an organization (Bart, 1997b; Hutton & Phillips, 2001).

Bartkus, Glassman, and McAfee (2000), attempted to debunk the perceived usefulness of mission statements. Through their investigation, Bartkus et al. (2000) argued, “The presence of a mission statement may actually be counterproductive precisely because it might encourage employees to act independently” (p. 25). This independent action, according to Bartkus et al. (2000), can run contrary to the policies and procedures established by the organization, and can lead to actions being taken by front-line employees which contradict those directives provided by top management. This argument, however, runs contrary to the work of both Kotter (2012) and Collins (2001), which is more representative of current practices of effective leaders and managers and calls for disciplined thoughts and actions by self-disciplined people which leads to purposeful change and the achievement of goals within the organization. In the end, Bartkus, et al. (2000) argue that mission statements should only be used as a communication tool. This does not invalidate the mission’s commonly accepted purpose, because it is a tool, one which communicates the intentions and purpose of the organization and can then be used to guide action, inspire and motivate employees, and even focus employees on those who benefit from their work. The challenge, then, is in writing a mission statement that can effectively do these things.

The Development of Mission Statements

It is commonly accepted throughout business and organizations that mission statements serve a purpose in an organization. However, mission statements do not write themselves. The writing of a mission statement requires people to be involved in the development process, and though the mission statement represents the enduring purpose (Pearce II, 1982) of an organization, it needs to be evaluated and rewritten on a periodic

basis (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012), and as part of that evaluation the appropriate length of a mission statement is regularly questioned.

The mission statement is at the core of a non-profit organization's work (Hutton and Phillips, 2001), and it addresses the work the organization will do for and on behalf of others. Schools are a specific type of nonprofit or social-sector organization (Collins, 2005; Drucker, 2001). In schools, there are some who believe that creating and clearly communicating the mission statement is the domain of the leader (Marion and Gonzales, 2014) as they articulate their vision for the school. Ubben et al. (2007) believe that it should be a dynamic process involving teachers, community members, and students. In general, there seems to be little consensus about who should be involved in the writing process, but it does seem clear that it should be a team effort, involving the leadership, management, and employees of an organization, with input from those who benefit from the organization's work.

There are various times throughout the life cycle of an organization when a mission statement should be written, reevaluated, and possibly rewritten. The Nebraska Department of Education (2012) identifies the evaluation and rewriting of the school mission statement as a key component of the continuous improvement process for accreditation. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) take a slightly different approach to the frequency of the evaluation of the school mission. To them, the review of the mission statement should be as continuous as the process for reviewing the structures, policies, and practices used to achieve the mission. This review and evaluation can lead to rewriting the mission statement.

There are two schools of thought for the composition of mission statements: comprehensive (Pearce II, 1982) and clear and concise (Drucker, 2001; Atrill et al., 2005). Additionally, Kotler and Scheff (1997) call for a mission statement that is feasible, motivating, and distinct. Cochran and David (1986) look past the length of the mission statement and call for them to have high readability and a positive tone. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) indicate that, regardless of length, “any valid mission statement should... summarize what an education is meant to help the learner achieve over the long haul, in and beyond school” (p. 12).

A comprehensive mission statement includes the products or services, market, and technology used by an organization (Pearce, 1982), but can also include financial objectives; non-financial objectives; values, beliefs, and philosophies; a definition of success; the number one priority; competitive position and strategy; distinctive competence and strength; behavior standards; the organization’s unique identity; the desired public image; the location of the organization; identification of stakeholders; concern for survival; and satisfying customers, employees, suppliers, society, and shareholders (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Bart & Tabone, 1999). Peterson and Jaret (2001) identify eight comprehensive mission factors to consider when composing a mission statement: the exact activities of the organization, the products and services offered, the ideal customer, the customer needs met and benefits provided by the organization, the markets and geographic areas served, the difference between the organization and its competition, the best thing a satisfied customer can say, and the most exciting part of the organization’s future. Then, a framework is provided to assist in the development of the first draft of a mission statement for the organization. They quickly follow this template,

though, with a tip for crafting the final statement. It needs to be something that everyone in the company knows by heart (Peterson & Jaret, 2001). A comprehensive mission statement can always be revised to be more clear and concise.

Atrill et al. (2005) state that a mission statement should be clear and simple, and should drive the objectives of an organization; it should be the starting point for new directives and initiatives. Bart (1997) argues for mission statements to be “clear, concise and to the point” (p. 11). In addition to Kotler and Scheff’s (1997) argument for a mission statement that is feasible, motivating, and distinctive, they also call for a mission that is succinct in describing what the organization does, whom it serves, and what it intends to accomplish. Kotter, in his discussion of leading change (2012), indicates that communicating with large groups of people is extremely challenging, and that “simplicity is essential” (p. 79). If mission statements are to guide behavior as previously stated, they must influence behavior, and to influence behavior, they need to be internalized, and shorter mission statements are more likely to be internalized (Campbell, 1997).

The Utilization of Mission Statements

One of the most commonly agreed upon purposes for a mission statement is to guide the actions of an organization. The issue or question is how can the mission statement do this? Schwartz (2001) explored this as part of a study on how codes of ethics affected behavior, and discovered a “black box” (p. 251) lying between business codes of ethics and employee behaviors. This same black box seems to lie between mission and actions, though Wiggins and McTighe (2007) attempt to cast a light into it by framing their discussion around the strong connection between mission, actions, and outcomes.

Possession of a mission statement would seem to be a prerequisite for this conversation, but the importance of having a mission statement has not always been met with unanimous consent. Bartkus et al. (2000) challenged the presumed benefits of mission statements, and came to the conclusion that while proponents of the usage of mission statements cite four commonly presumed benefits (to communicate the organization's direction and purpose, to serve as a control mechanism to keep the organization 'on track,' to guide actions, and to inspire and motivate employees), mission statements should only be used as a communication tool. While Bartkus et al. (2000) have taken this narrow view regarding the value of possessing and utilizing mission statements, others view the possession of mission statements, and the four common purposes of a mission statement, as integral in the leadership and management efforts of an organization. Mission possession, though, does not equal mission utilization. Many studies have been conducted attempting to establish a connection between mission statements and performance, but rarely do they investigate the actions guided by the mission; rather, they study the correlation between having a mission and outcomes (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Bart & Baetz, 1998; Weiss & Piderit, 1999; Davis, Ruhe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2007; Alegre, Berbegal-Mirabent, Guerrero, & Mas-Machuca, 2018). To truly utilize a mission statement, an organization must use it as a guide to action (Atrill, Omran, & Pointon, 2005; Bart, 1997b; Campbell, 1997; Hutton & Phillips, 2001; Kotler & Scheff, 1997; Pearce, 1982; Peterson & Jaret, 2001; Tyson & Schell, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). Wiggins and McTighe (2007) prompt organizations to ask, and answer, the question, "If this is our mission, then what would it look like in practice?" (p. 23).

Mission Utilization in Companies. As Tyson and Schell (2003) state, the mission statement, whether comprehensive or concise, must “guide you and your company in making the critical decisions that affect the direction of your company” (p.59). When a company is setting goals and objectives, whether it is part of the strategic plan or not, those goals should be closely tied to the mission statement (Peterson & Jaret, 2001). The mission statement, though, is an important part of the strategic planning process (Pearce II, 1982; Mintzberg, 1994). Bart (1997a) includes that it should play a part in resource allocation, as well as guiding the behaviors and actions of an organization’s employees.

As a communication tool, Tyson and Schell (2003), encourage business owners to display their mission statement on walls, bulletin boards, and in the most visible places in their businesses, as well as in the executive summaries of business plans, on the first page of employee manuals, and on every document the company generates. Peterson and Jaret (2001) state that everyone in the company should know the mission statement, and it should be posted on walls, in the employee handbook, and on business cards so “it will be everywhere you want to be” (p. 52).

Mission Utilization in Organizations. Because nonprofit organizations start with their mission (Drucker, 1989), they provide some of the best examples of how to utilize the mission. Peterson and Jaret (2001) call the mission statement the “driving force” (p. 221) behind a nonprofit organization, a force which should convince those who interact with the organization of the importance of its work. The mission statement, in a nonprofit, should drive the decision-making process by challenging decision makers to determine if actions will help the organization accomplish their goals (Hutton & Phillips,

2001). A clear and strong mission will help an organization reach its long-term goals, and provide flexibility and adaptability when opportunities or challenges arise, all the while helping the organization stay on course (Peterson & Jaret, 2001). A part of reaching those long-term goals is strategic planning, and nonprofit organizations should be using their mission statement as part of the strategic planning processes (Kotler and Scheff, 1997). In the four-step strategic-planning process outlined by Kotler and Scheff (1997), analysis of the organization-wide mission, objectives, and goals is part of step one, with future goals and objectives being derived from the difference between where the organization is and where it wants to be.

Nonprofit and social-sector organizations start with their missions (Drucker, 1989; Collins, 2005). For social-sector organizations, performance is not measured by financial returns, but by how they deliver on their mission relative to their resources. Progress toward goals is not always shown by quantifiable data indicating results, it can also be shown by assembling evidence that tracks progress. This qualitative evidence should identify the steps taken to help the organization on the journey to achieve its mission (Collins, 2005).

Mission Utilization in Schools. In schools, the strategic planning process is known as the continuous school improvement process, and the school mission statement is part of this process (Boerma, 2006; Nebraska Department of Education, 2012; Gurley, Peters, Collins, & Fifolt, 2015; Advance Education, 2017a; Advance Education, 2017b). Boerma (2006) indicates the importance of providing the mission statement as the context for governance, decision making, and management of the school. These are all part of the continuous improvement process. However, there are additional outcomes that occur

when the focus of schools shifts to their mission; this shift requires a shift in mindset, because systematic attention to mission is rarely at the heart of American social and educational conversation (Pekarsky, 2007). Systematic attention does not just address governance, decision making, and management, as Boerma (2006) indicates; more specifically, it becomes the driving force informing everything, including curriculum, programs, pedagogy, evaluation, architecture, interior design, hiring, and hard-to-describe cultural components (House & Sears, 2002; Pekarsky, 2007). DuFour and Fullan (2013) would agree to the importance of this systematic attention; they argue that to be among the world's best, school systems must ensure that all stakeholders understand the purpose, priorities, and goals of the school and school system. These goals must be communicated clearly, consistently, and effectively. Mixed messages can lead to confusion and a loss of credibility. To ensure this clarity and consistency, it is important to clearly focus on mission, actions, and achievement, as indicated by Wiggins and McTighe (2007).

In *Schooling By Design: Mission, Action, and Achievement* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007), readers are presented with the reasons and means to create a mission-driven school, through intentional focus on mission, action, and achievement. Wiggins & McTighe (2007) place the mission statement at the center of the school, as the goal for all educational purposes, and then plan and work backwards to develop the structures, policies, practices, and goals needed to achieve that mission. As part of moving from having a mission to utilizing a mission, Wiggins and McTighe (2007) challenge school leaders, not just administrators but all those who act in a leadership capacity, to ask and answer the question, "If this is our mission, then what would it look like in practice?" (p. 23). Because it is listed as part of the school improvement process above (Nebraska

Department of Education, 2012), each school needs to revisit and potentially revise their mission. In this process, school leaders need to focus on why the school exists and operates. They need to focus on what the school does, not what the school and staff will provide (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007). As schools begin to shift the focus of their missions to actions and goals, Wiggins and McTighe (2007) provide guidance for connecting school goals and school improvement by reminding school leaders that goals are “unachievable without a set of coherently planned actions for getting there” (p. 203). Jim Collins (2005) would agree: the whole point of school improvement and the actions taken in leading and managing a school is to ensure the right decisions are being made and the right actions are being taken, all for the achievement of the mission of the school.

Connections Between the Concepts

Collins (2005) points to the interconnections and overlap between the responsibilities of principals; leadership, management, and change; and mission statements. Studying these connections, and how they are intertwined, can shed light into Schwartz’s (2001) black box that separates a school’s mission and the achievement of that school’s mission. To fully grasp these interconnections, it is best to start by looking at the individual connections between the responsibilities of principals; leadership, management, and change; and mission statements.

Connections Between the Responsibilities of Principals and Leadership, Management, and Change

The roles and responsibilities of a principal identified by the Nebraska Department of Education (2012) and the earlier identification of leadership, management, and change responsibilities align nicely. In fact, an analysis of these responsibilities

shows that principals in Nebraska are expected to both lead and manage their school, all in an effort to help them continuously improve.

The eight effective practices of principals identified by the Nebraska Department of Education (2017) are a combination of leadership, management, and change responsibilities. Sometimes, the leadership, management, and/or change responsibilities are quite evident in the practices, and sometimes a principal must look deeper into the indicators and expected actions to fully grasp the implications of the practices. Earlier, eight questions related to these responsibilities were posed, and when these questions are considered through the lens of leadership, management, and change, a clear connection becomes evident. Following each question below is an explanation of the responsibilities of the principal in regard to the practice identified as related to the leadership, management, and change efforts identified above:

- **What is the principal's vision of teaching and learning?** To create this vision, the principal must manage multiple sources of information and engage key school community members, and then establish and communicate a shared vision and set of core values for teaching and learning that result in an improved capacity for change.
- **How does the principal develop relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?** To develop these relationships, the principal must have the ability to manage the development and support of productive relationships with all stakeholders.
- **How does the principal plan for and lead continuous school improvement?** To plan for and lead continuous school improvement, the principal must

formulate, implement, and manage a strategic improvement plan, which leads to increased school effectiveness and capacity.

- **What are the factors influencing the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?** Once these factors are identified, the principal must ensure the creation of a rigorous curriculum, the use of effective teaching practices, and accountability measures for the implementation of each.
- **How does the principal plan for the development of the whole staff, and the individual staff members in the school?** Once this plan is created, the principal must build, develop, and manage a professional community through effective recruitment, hiring, training, and support activities.
- **How does the principal manage the organization, operations, and resources of the school?** To manage these items, the principal must determine the priorities of the organization, and then direct the operations and resources of the school to achieve those priorities.
- **How does the principal describe the culture of the school?** To be effective, the principal must create and nurture an effective school culture.
- **What effect do local, state, and national educational policies have on the principal's school?** To navigate the number of and effects of policies and policy changes, the principal must lead and manage in a manner that benefits all shareholders.

The actions described in response to each of these eight questions are those of leaders and managers made to achieve change and school improvement. Through the

analysis of these connections, it is clear that Nebraska public school principals are responsible for the leadership, management, and improvement of their schools.

Changing schools, through the continuous school improvement process, is specified as one of the eight effective practices of principals (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017), but the school improvement process, in and of itself, is composed of many parts. Central to the accreditation process is the identification of the vision for the future, and the development and execution of a plan for how to move from where the school is to where it wants to be (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012). This process, one of change, encompasses both the leadership and management responsibilities identified above.

Connections Between Leadership, Management, and Change and Mission Statements

Change, as related to leadership and management, shares a clear connection with mission. As determined above, the mission is the stated purpose of an organization and should serve to guide action. Purposeful change efforts are actions taken to move from where an organization is to where it wants to be (Saxena, 2009). When change efforts, leadership, and management are all driven by purpose - by the mission of the organization - that organization is driven by mission, and has the ability to be great (Collins, 2005).

Mission-Driven Change. If purposeful change efforts are those that take an organization from where it is to where it wants to be (Saxena, 2009), and, as stated above, the mission provides both the reason why an organization exists *and* serves to guide action, then mission-driven change is the change made for the purpose of achieving the organization's mission, or change efforts guided by the mission of the organization.

These change efforts are at the heart of Kotler and Scheff's (1997) strategic planning process; in fact, they are at the center of most strategic planning processes (Pearce II, 1982; Mintzberg, 1994).

Kotter (2012) provides eight steps for leading change in organizations, and when they are viewed through the lens of mission-driven change, they become even more powerful. To lead mission-driven change, one must:

- Establish a sense of the mission's urgency
- Create a coalition of leaders guided by the mission
- Develop a vision for the future and a strategic plan to achieve it
- Communicate the mission-driven change vision
- Empower broad-based, mission-guided action
- Generate short-term, mission-guided wins
- Consolidate gains and produce more mission-guided change
- Anchor new approaches in this mission-driven culture

Kotter's (2012) eight steps are individually powerful, and when focused on a vision of the future, can lead to success. Change, though, doesn't happen on its own, it requires leadership and management to drive it, to guide it.

Mission-Driven Leadership. Earlier, leadership and management were described as overlapping parts, each with different aspects, requiring different strengths, and different focal points, but contributing to the "daily affairs" (Cuban, 1998, p.xx) of the principal. When these overlapping parts are considered separately in relation to mission, the differences become clear. The phrase "mission-driven leadership" can be described as leadership guided by mission, or leadership driven by mission. The decisions made by

mission-driven leaders are contextualized and explained by efforts to achieve the mission. Those efforts, though, are many-faceted.

What does mission-driven leadership do? What do a mission-driven leader's actions look like? How do the definitions of leadership from above transform when considered in a mission-driven, or mission-guided, context?

- According to Buckingham and Coffman (2014), a great leader's focus is outward, at the future of the organization, and the route forward. Great mission-driven leaders, then, direct the organization to achieve a mission and choose the route forward guided by the mission.
- According to Marion and Gonzales (2014), the responsibility of leadership is to explore new territory. A mission-driven leader, then, is an explorer with a purpose.
- According to Kotter (2012), leadership's responsibility is to build new systems or transform old ones; this includes creating organizations, directing them into the future, and inspiring change. A mission-driven leader builds new systems or transforms them in order to achieve the organization's mission. A mission-driven leader creates organizations, directs them into the future, and inspires change in order to achieve a mission.
- According to Cuban (1988), leaders "shape goals, motivations, and actions of others" (p. xx), initiate change in order to reach new and existing goals, and "occasionally, they lead... to preserve what is valuable" (p. xx). When placed within the context of the mission, a mission-driven leader utilizes the mission to

shape the goals, provide motivations, and encourage the actions of others in order to achieve the mission of the organization.

Leaders are seen as individuals who motivate and inspire their followers to disregard, or transcend, their self-interests in pursuit of something more than reward (Kurland et al., 2010). They are the banner carriers for the organization. The mission-driven leader's banner displays the organization's mission and mission statement.

Mission-Driven Management. If the mission-driven leader is out front, looking forward, leading with the mission in mind, the mission-driven manager is behind the scenes, making sure it is all possible. Just as with "mission-driven change" and "mission-driven leadership," the phrase "mission-driven management" can be defined by its constituent parts: the decisions made by managers, guided by the mission of the organization. The decisions made by a mission-driven manager would be contextualized and explained by the organization's mission, made in an effort to achieve the mission.

This may be easier to illustrate through familiar examples. To better understand what mission-driven management does, and what the actions of a mission-driven manager look like, consider those definitions of management from above and how they transform when considered from a mission-driven, or mission-guided, context.

- According to Buckingham and Coffman (2014), a great manager's focus is inward on the individuals, and in turn, the individual actions of the organization. Great managers guide their people to become the best version of themselves. A great mission-driven manager, then, is developing the individuals and guiding them to become individuals who can help the organization achieve its mission.

- According to Marion and Gonzales (2014), managerial efforts are made to exploit existing territory. Placed in the context of being mission-driven, those efforts are undertaken to specifically help the organization achieve its mission.
- According to Kotter (2012), management's responsibility is to make a system work, to help those in the organization do what they know how to do. These responsibilities include planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling and problem solving. When placed in the context of mission, and being mission-driven, management's responsibility is to drive the systems, resources, and decisions of an organization toward the mission.
- According to Cuban (1998), management maintains efficient and effective organizational arrangements. When these activities are placed in the context of mission, mission-driven management are the collective actions taken to maintain effective and efficient organizational arrangements that foster the organization's ability to achieve the mission.

Managers are responsible for the internal workings of an organization, and mission-driven managers are responsible for ensuring the organization is continually working toward achieving its mission.

Leadership and management need to exist hand in hand, and they must work together to ensure progress is being made toward organization goals. Mission-driven leadership, mission-driven management, and mission-driven change all have one specific goal: to achieve the mission of the organization. This requires a focus on both the big picture, and the fine details. The big picture, if leadership presents it so, is out front and visible, it is almost easy to see; the little things, however, are more challenging. The little

things, (Walsh, Jamison, & Walsh, 2009; Wooden & Jamison, 2004), when done the right way and for the right reasons, can lead to the accomplishment of big things. This mindset can directly translate to schools, organizations, or businesses and the way they are led, managed, and improved. If an organization is focused on its mission, and ensures that decisions are guided by and driven by that mission, progress will be made toward achieving that mission.

Connections Between Mission Statements and the Responsibilities of Principals

A school's mission statement, as a guide to action, provides context for the actions of the principal. It provides the why behind the what. If one revisits each of the effective practices provided by the Nebraska Department of Education (2017) and considers these practices in the context of the mission of the school, with the mission providing a guide to each of these practices, the clarity of the connection becomes evident. How does the mission of the school guide and inform:

- The principal's vision for teaching and learning? How is the principal's vision for teaching and learning putting practices into place that will lead to the achievement of the school's mission?
- The principal's development of relationships with students, staff, families, and the community? How are the relationships the principal is developing with students, staff, families, and the community aiding the school and its students in its journey to achieve the school's mission?
- The school's continuous improvement process? How are the school improvement goals, and the entire school improvement process and efforts, aligned to the mission of the school, driving the school closer to the achievement of its mission?

- The direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?

How do the school's programs, courses, instructional practices, and curriculum all assist in the efforts to achieve the school's mission?

- The principal's plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members? How is the school mission statement informing the personnel and professional development practices of the school?
- The principal's management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school? How is the principal making day-to-day decisions to create an environment where the school mission can be achieved?
- The principal's efforts to create an effective school? How is the principal creating a school culture in which the school mission can be achieved?
- The principal's interpretation and implementation of local, state, and national educational policies? How does governance structure of the school encourage and assist the school in its efforts to achieve the mission?

Each of the questions above may seem ideological and impractical, as though there is little to no connection between the mission and the daily actions taken in the school. Principals may feel that the school mission does not or should not guide and inform the principal's work. In fact, when Stemler, Bebell, and Sonnabend (2011) compared school missions, and then linked the school missions to actions occurring in the classroom, 17% of school principals did not indicate a strong link. In another, earlier study, Baetz and Bart (1996) found that a focus on day-to-day activities removed the focus from long-term, mission-oriented activities. Principals chase and put out fires, but to borrow from Jim Collins in *Good to Great*: "We don't have great schools, because we

have good schools" (2001, p.1) and for a school to achieve long-term greatness, its leadership must be focused on the achievement of its mission (Collins, 2005). To lead in the efforts to achieve long-term greatness, a principal must focus the school's efforts on achieving the school's mission. The principal must lead the school through a unifying purpose, informing and educating stakeholders about why the actions being taken are being taken (Bart, Bontis, & Taggar, 2001; McClees, 2016) in processes like the continuous school improvement process and goal setting (Hallinger & Heck, 2002), and by restructuring departments, curriculum, instruction, and accountability in order to achieve the department and school mission (Deardorff & Posler, 2005). The principal must recruit, hire, train, and develop staff members with a continued focus on achieving the mission, in order to avoid a lack of understanding or commitment to the mission (Slate, Jones, Wiesman, Alexander, & Saenz, 2008). The principal must manage the systems - the school's resources - to enable the achievement of the mission (Thompson, 1994). Principals, and other school leaders, must align virtually every organizational dimension with the mission statement (Desmidt et al., 2011). That is the commitment required to become a great school (Collins, 2005).

Summary and Conclusion

These interconnections lead to a realization for principals, and those who are affected by principals: the school's mission statement can provide the context for all of the leadership, management, and improvement activities of, and within, schools. Every school in the state of Nebraska has a mission statement, as it is part of the mandated continuous school improvement process.

Principals across Nebraska are expected, as part of their effective performance, to lead these school improvement processes. This continuous improvement process is not, however, the only responsibility of principals. They are also responsible for establishing and communicating a vision for learning; developing relationships; providing instructional leadership; building a professional community; managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school; creating a school culture; and acting with fairness, integrity, and professionalism.

So, how are principals leading, managing, and improving their schools? How are public school principals from across the state utilizing their school's mission to fulfil these responsibilities? This is unclear. A study and discussion of the connections between the mission statement and the actions of principals is missing from the current literature. Specifically missing is an understanding of the influence of mission statements on the practices of principals from across the state of Nebraska.

In order to understand how principals are using the mission statement of their school to lead, manage, and improve their schools, one must explore the practices of principals and determine if those practices are considered in the context of the school mission or if decisions are made without regard for the purpose of the school. To understand if principals are leading, managing, and improving their schools to be effective organizations, we must uncover the answer to the question, "How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission to lead, manage, and improve their schools?"

Chapter 3: Methodology

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

In their search for understanding, practitioners turn to qualitative research.

Qualitative research explores a problem, which can lead to the development of a complex and detailed understanding of a problem or situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) encourage practitioners to employ applied research, which Hancock and Algozzine (2017) describe as “problem-based research” (p.5). This focus on problems is just one of the many characteristics of qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify four key features of qualitative research: a focus on meaning and understanding, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, understanding is developed through an inductive research process, and it produces a rich description of the problem.

This rich description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) is created through a qualitative process that occurs in the natural setting and using multiple sources of data, with the participants own meanings and understandings shared as part of that data (Creswell, 2014). Then, through both inductive and deductive analysis, along with the investigator’s reflection, the study produces a holistic account and newfound understanding of the problem.

This study’s purpose was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. It explored the practices of principals to understand if they are guided and informed by the school’s mission and to discover if those practices are intended to lead to the achievement

of the school's mission. Qualitative research and its focus on developing an understanding of problems was a logical choice to achieve this purpose.

Research Approach

Case study research, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), can be described as an "in-depth description and analysis" (p. 37) of an object or phenomenon, determining that "the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in defining the object of study: the case" (p. 38). Yin (2018) defines case study research as "an empirical method" which investigates a case "in depth and within its real-world context" (p.15). Creswell and Poth (2018) support and expand on these definitions by stating that the investigator in case study research "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)... through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 96).

Case study research focuses on the unit of analysis: the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which is "a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy" (p. 38). There are two basic types of case study: intrinsic and instrumental, and the difference between the two is in the focus of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In intrinsic case study, the case is the focus. In instrumental case study, an issue or problem is the focus (Stake, 1995), and individuals are selected to be studied because of their connection to the issue or problem.

Stake (1995) recognizes intrinsic and instrumental case studies and lists collective, or multicase, studies as an additional type of case study. In multicase studies, the individual cases are instrumental to the study, but the understanding is derived from looking across the collection of individual cases. Multicase studies are viewed by many

as a specialized version of case study, as something different than single-case studies.

Stake (2006) views the multicase study as something like a meta-analysis of cases, saying, “The multicase project is a research design for closely examining several cases linked together” (p. v). The link between cases, then, is a single issue, studied across multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Yin (2018) suggests utilizing the logic of replication to assist with cross-case analysis. In using replication, the inquirer uses the same procedures for each case. This is a more structured or formalized (Firestone & Herriott, 1984) procedure than is generally used in traditional, single-case studies. A more formalized structure and replicated procedure adds to the value of the study, as it allows for generalizations to be drawn from across cases and is a reason for investigation through multicase study research.

The value of multicase studies, according to Stake (1995), is in the coordination of the individual studies, and looking across those cases, collectively. This cross-case analysis is enhanced by “an early commitment to common topics” (p. 25). The cross-case analysis then allows the researcher to develop enhanced understandings and conclusions from the collection of cases, grounded in the understanding and meaning derived from the individual cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Multicase studies are particularly suited to improve practice because the analytic generalizations created allow the researcher to go beyond the specifics of the individual case studies to explore “the questions... posed at the outset of the study” (Yin, 2018, p. 38; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of the creation of analytic generalizations through individual- and cross-case analysis which can be used to improve practice, a multicase study research methodology has been selected for this study.

An instrumental multicase study methodology was selected to support the creation of analytic generalizations in order to develop an understanding of principals, their decision-making processes, their actions, and the research question: How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools? The desire to develop this understanding made an instrumental multicase study an ideal methodology to choose (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This study was bounded by the role of the participant, the Nebraska public school principal. Each individual case study focused on the decisions made, actions taken, and artifacts observed and provided by principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools, with a specific focus on the role of the school mission in the principal's decisions and actions. Upon completion of the individual case studies, cross-case analysis was performed to explore and uncover any patterns and trends in the utilization of the school mission in the decisions made and actions taken by principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools.

To ensure the findings of this multicase study were consistent with the data collected, they were externally reviewed for verification. Stake (2006) refers to this as triangulation across cases, and it requires the researcher to invite peers who are familiar with the quintain or with the case to review the findings. In essence, the external findings review is a peer review. A peer review is a thorough examination of the evidence and data to assess whether the findings are “plausible” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250). To determine whether the findings are plausible, the external reviewer was given access to the evidence and data collected, and asked to review it to determine if “given the data collected, the results make sense” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 251). Conducting an

external findings review ensured the findings were consistent with, and ring true to, what another researcher may find.

Role of the Researcher

My experiences as a marketing consultant, teacher, principal, and external visitation team member have each made a unique contribution to my skill set and knowledge that has prepared me to conduct this exploration into how Nebraska public school principals utilize their mission statements to lead, manage, and improve their school. These various roles throughout my career have led me to this point and have prepared me for the role of researcher in this study.

Marketing Consultant

Conducting interviews, collecting data, and producing credible, applicable findings were essential parts of the work I did as a marketing consultant. One of the services I offered to my clients was business planning, and a cornerstone of this work was mission statement development and implementation. As part of the mission statement development process, I worked with companies and their employees, interviewing individuals and groups and drawing information from them to determine the work they did, what they actually wanted to do, where they were, and where they wanted to be. I worked with clients to identify their strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities that lie before them, and the threats they faced. As I learned more about each company, I helped them craft a mission that provided a strategic purpose for the work they did in their own words, thoughts, and beliefs. At the conclusion of this process, I presented clients with a big-picture strategy for moving forward, which utilized the mission of the organization as its foundation. This strategy was built upon an iterative process beginning with the initial

conversations, growing and developing over the course of the interviews, and ultimately concluding in the final report to the clients. This continual process of collecting and analyzing data, then refining and revising the findings to produce a credible and applicable strategy has prepared me for the role of researcher in this study, where it will be important to ensure the findings ring true (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Teacher

Mission utilization was at the center of the marketing and entrepreneurship courses I taught. In these classes, I drew upon my experiences as a marketing consultant, and taught students to develop and utilize mission statements within items such as their own business and marketing plans, their business letterhead and communication materials, and in practical applications, such as marketing for the school. These lessons informed the site observation and evidence analysis protocols used in this study, as well as my ability to collect and analyze data and evidence.

Principal

As the researcher and primary data collection instrument, my personal experiences are important. My experiences as a principal have informed the participant selection protocol and developed my ability to conduct research. I have served as principal in two schools: the first, a school the Nebraska Department of Education would classify as a very small school; the second, one of the 30 largest high schools in the state. These experiences have been very different, and they have illustrated to me the differences between being a Pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten through 12th grade principal and of being a building principal in a much larger district. The title is the same, but the position is different. In this study, participants were selected from a variety of

school sizes to capture the potential effect of these differences in the principals' utilization of their mission statements.

In my role as a principal, I have utilized semi-structured, open-ended interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis as data collection strategies. I have conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews to select new teachers and to determine the course of events in regard to disciplinary issues. As part of the teacher evaluation process, I have conducted site observations and evidence analysis. I have sought out, collected, and analyzed evidence and practices as part of my work with the whole staff and with department heads in creating professional development opportunities, determining best and new practices, and evaluating the climate and culture of the building.

External Visitation Team Member

The external school improvement visit is a consultatory visit by external representatives to the school "to review progress and provide written recommendations" (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012, p. 22) in accordance with the stated goal of the improvement cycle. I have had the privilege of serving as an external visit team member at districts with student populations ranging from just over 150 students to over 40,000 students, and from southeast, to central, to southwest Nebraska. Through these visits, I developed an understanding of the challenges facing principals and other administrators from across of the state. Both location and school size were components in the participant selection process for this study.

As an external school visitation team member, I have worked with schools and individuals from the schools to gather information about their practices and outcomes. I have conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews searching for information, not

answers, just like those that will be conducted in this study. Working with these teams, I made single-day visits to each school to capture an image of what the school is about, what work they are doing, and how they communicate with people inside and outside of the school. Schools and districts provided our teams with a variety of documents and evidence of the work they had done over the past five years in order to achieve their goals. Then, after collecting this data, the external visitation team members, including myself, each analyzed the data and evidence presented and collected in order to paint a comprehensive picture of the school, its practices, and its goals. In each case, this picture was then presented in the external visitation findings report for the host school and the Nebraska Department of Education which ensures the findings ring true (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to both the participants and to an external reviewer. This experience directly developed my ability to collect, analyze, and present the data, evidence, and findings of this study.

Based on these experiences, I believe I was well-suited to serve in the role of researcher for this study. My experiences as a marketing consultant, teacher, principal, and external visitation team member have each made their own contributions to my preparation to conduct this exploration into how Nebraska public school principals utilize their mission statements to lead, manage, and improve their school. I have experience in the data collection methods, in the data analysis methods, and in bringing this analysis together into coherent findings.

Personal Philosophy

In the Doane doctoral program, I have had time to consider what motivates me and to better understand why I do what I do. I have come to realize I am motivated by

what works. I can appreciate what works, and if I try something and it does not work, I try something different and work to make things better. I have always known I am a fixer, but in the doctoral program, I learned that I am a pragmatic fixer. As a doctoral student, I realized that if I was going to pursue a research study, it would be through the lens of a pragmatist.

Creswell (2014) states, “Pragmatists do not see the world as an absolute entity” (p.11); they focus on the problem being studied and the questions being asked about the problem and then use multiple approaches to understand the problem (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a worldview, pragmatism is driven by actions, situations, and consequences; it is concerned with finding solutions to problems, and what works in different situations (Creswell, 2014). In practice, the pragmatist researcher “will use multiple methods of data collection to best answer the research question... and will emphasize the importance of conducting research that best addresses the research problem” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.27). Pragmatic researchers conduct studies to find solutions to real-world problems, and they use the most appropriate methods for addressing the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The pragmatist believes in what is useful, practical, and what works. For me, though, pragmatism is about more than research; it is a part of the way I view the world around me.

The pragmatist views the world as a series of experiments, where problems are presented, and solutions are explored (Lachs, 2012). Once a solution to a problem is found, pragmatists “build habits out of successful operations. We revise the habits reluctantly and only when they no longer yield results” (Lachs, 2012, p. 9). Pragmatists view progress as the improvement of conditions (Lachs, 2012) and the improvement of

practice, as they continually search for what works (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This continual improvement and focus on what works, leads Lachs (2012) to conclude that pragmatists “generally agree that a central part of the business of life is to make life better” (p. 40).

Stoicism seems to stand in direct contrast to pragmatism. “Stoics,” Lachs (2012) says, “are quick to call attention to the limits of our powers and recommend accepting them without complaint” (p. 40). Acceptance of the present situation is essential to the stoics. Epictetus (trans. 1983) says “some things are up to us and some things are not” (p. 11). This surrender to the way things are may seem incompatible with the ambition of the pragmatist, but it does not have to be (Lachs, 2012).

Stoic pragmatism is created by combining pragmatism’s desire to improve conditions and stoicism’s acceptance of conditions (Lachs, 2012). Improvement requires acceptance of the present state and condition of something in order to improve it. Stoic pragmatism allows one to know and accept the object’s current realties, both the positives and negatives, the strengths and weaknesses. (Lachs, 2012). Lachs (2012) put it simply: to the stoic pragmatist, “acceptance is the price of improvement” (p. 50). Continual improvement, Lachs (2012) says, is part of creating the best world. “The best world we can create... the best world possible, is not the best world” (Lachs, 2012, p. 44). Lachs (2012) believes the best world is the best combination of the outcomes of the decision we have made and the actions we have taken. Stoic pragmatism provides the practitioner a philosophy to accept what things are and to strive to make them better (Lachs, 2012), which is how I choose to operate in the world.

By anchoring this study in stoic pragmatism and qualitative research, I was able to avoid searching for the “truth of knowledge” (Creswell, 2014, p.7) that positivists and post-positivists seek in their research, but instead to search for the constructivist (Creswell & Poth, 2018) understanding of the individual principals and their practices. By seating this research in stoic pragmatism, I was able to understand each principal’s school and practices and to explore the distance between the school’s current reality and where it wants to be. Through this research, I hope to be able to help others explore their practice and shine a light into the black box (Schwartz, 2001) separating their current reality and their goals for the future, and to aid them in their efforts to close the distance between where they are and where they want to be.

Personal Biases and Expectations

When considering this study and my research questions, I realized I entered this study with presupposed and established beliefs regarding the research questions. At the outset of this study, my thoughts, including my biases, beliefs, and expectations, regarding each of the research questions were as follows:

- 1. How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission to lead, manage, and improve their schools?** If asked directly about their use of the school’s mission statement, I expected school principals to say that it directly affects their decisions and actions. However, if asked about their daily work, I expected principals to respond with some version of the response, “I do what is best for students.” I believe that when a principal utilizes the school mission to lead, manage, and improve their school, their practices are guided and informed

by the mission, which then connect the actions of the principal and help the school to continually progress toward achieving that mission.

2. **How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's vision for teaching and learning?** I expected principals to provide a number of different answers to this question, which would distinctly vary by grade level served, as the educational expectations at different grade levels change. I believe that a vision for teaching and learning guided and informed by the mission is one that can be understood and supported by students, teachers, parents, and the community, and will help the school to achieve its purpose.
3. **How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's development of relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?** I expected principals to refer to the type of relationship, not the substance of the relationship. I believe a relationship guided and informed by the mission is one that aligns the purpose of the school and the needs of the student, and maintains that alignment.
4. **How does the mission of the school guide and inform the school's continuous improvement process?** I expected the school mission to be a significant part of this answer, as the mission is a significant part of the continuous school improvement process. I believe that a continuous school improvement process guided and informed by the mission of the school has goals aligned with the mission of the school, and when achieved helps the school to move closer to achieving its mission.

- 5. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?** I expected most answers about the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum to revolve around compliance with Rule 10 of the Nebraska Department of Education. I believe that programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum that are guided and informed by the school mission are designed to progress the student and school toward the achievement of goals and the purpose of the school.
- 6. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members?** I expected principals to indicate that professional development for the whole staff and individual staff members is tied to the school improvement initiatives, directed by district employees outside of the school building, or dictated by the school principal. I believe that when whole staff and individual staff member professional development is guided and informed by the school mission, it is connected to the continuous school improvement process; the programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum of the school; the relationships within the school; the culture of the school; and the principal's vision for teaching and learning.
- 7. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school?** I expected the principals who could answer this question to answer with a number of factors beyond the mission. I believe that when the principal's management of the school's organizations, operations, and resources are guided and informed by

the school mission statement, the mission provides the context for, and informs, the principal's decisions and actions.

8. **How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's efforts to create an effective school culture?** I expected most principals to discuss specific attributes of the culture they desire in their school. I believe that a school culture guided and informed by the school's mission is one in which the students and adults within the culture can work to achieve the school's mission.
9. **How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's interpretation and implementation of local, state, and national educational policies?** I expected most principals to view educational policies, whether they are local, state, or national, in terms of compliance and not in terms of interpretation. I believe that when local, state, and national policies are interpreted and implemented in a manner guided and informed by the school mission, principals have the opportunity to use those educational policies in a manner that can help their school to achieve its mission.
10. **How do you know if the school has achieved its mission?** I expected principals to consider a number of things on a regular basis, including: how to increase test scores, how to improve the climate and culture of their school, and how to do what is best for their students. In addition to this, principals deal with daily issues surrounding each of the practices listed above, which pulls focus away from the mission of the school. I believe that when a principal's actions are focused on achieving the school's mission, all of these practices align with one another in a coherent, tangible manner.

If explicitly asked about their use of the school's mission statement, I expected school principals to say that it directly affects their decisions and actions. However, as discussed above, a number of factors, like financial concerns, state assessments, standards alignment, evaluation tools and instructional models, can regularly usurp the organizational purpose as the driving factor for decisions made and actions taken. When these daily concerns are taken out of the context of the mission, and decisions are made that feel good and right but do not support the mission of the school, then they have not helped the school to achieve its purpose. In nearly all cases, I anticipated the principals to, in some shape or form, state that their primary concerns are to "do what is best for students." This is a subjective statement and is bound to the time and place of the decision. A principal with the best interests of the school and its students in mind would define right and best within the context of the school mission statement. The purpose of the school has been stated, but I believe principals are ignoring it.

I believe that, over time, schools take on the personalities and priorities of the principals who lead and manage them. Language patterns change, priorities change, and attitudes change. These changes should be purposeful, and the decisions and actions that lead to them, start with the principal and their priorities.

Principals are trained to do their jobs by principal preparation programs at colleges and universities across the state of Nebraska and throughout the country. The curriculum of these programs is focused on the what and how of the principalship—what the principal needs to do and how they need to do it. These programs do not, from my experience, instruct principals to contextualize their decisions and actions within the mission of their school. I do not believe these programs are training principals to use the

mission statement as part of their daily work. The result of this action-focused preparation is principals who are able to make decisions and take action, but who do so without consistency in the reason or rationale behind those actions. These decisions and actions may even be made consciously, but they are not made based on the school's purpose.

This lack of belief regarding principals and their utilization of the school mission statement and a desire to shed light on those practices of principals who are mission-driven drove this study. But to be effective and to be fair to the participants, I had to set these beliefs aside. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this process as bracketing, which is the process of temporarily setting aside our beliefs and assumptions so we can examine the phenomenon itself and approach the case and its data with a “fresh perspective” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78), which can be used to understand the practices of the principals as they are, not as I believe them to be, nor as I believe they should be. In the true spirit of a stoic pragmatist (Lachs, 2012), I accepted the data as it came and understood that any and all data I obtained were valuable, especially valuable in creating a general understanding of how principals utilize their school's mission to lead, manage, and improve their school.

Participant Selection

In any case study, single-case or multicase, the goal of participant selection should be to “maximize what we can learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). In order to achieve the goals of this study, multiple cases were purposefully selected in order to provide the breadth and depth of rich information that can be revealed by case study. The data collection process in this case study, though, was different than in typical case study

research, due to a) the instrumental interests of this particular multicase study, b) the dominant focus on the practices of the individual principals rather than the principals themselves (Stake, 1995), and c) a goal of analytic generalization rather than particularization (Stake, 2006).

In a multicase study such as this, the phenomenon to be studied is identified, and then participants, or individual cases, are selected to shine light on the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) state that once the multiple cases have been selected, a typical approach to reporting the results of the study is “to provide first a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, as well as assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case” (p. 100). Stake (2006) extends this statement, explaining the value of the single cases within the multiple case study: “In multicase study research, the single case is of interest because it belongs to a particular collection of cases... The cases in the collection are... bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon” (p. 4-6). Stake (2006) calls this group, category, or phenomenon a “quintain” (p. 6). Developing a better understanding of the quintain is the purpose of multicase research, and to understand it better, “we study some of its single cases—its... manifestations. But it is the quintain we seek to understand. We study what is similar and different about the cases in order to understand the quintain better” (Stake, 2006, p. 6).

To achieve this understanding of the quintain, it was important to select participants who represent the quintain itself. Individual participants were selected through maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which allowed the

researcher to determine the criteria used to select the participants at the beginning of the study and then select participants who meet those criteria in different ways or sites.

Maximum variation sampling “increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158).

Four main criteria were used for the selection of participants in this study: school mission type, grade level served, school location, and principal tenure.

- **School Mission Type:** In chapter 2, two different types of mission were described: comprehensive and concise. For the purpose of this study and participant selection, a comprehensive mission statement is one which is composed of a list of three or more specific items or actions to be accomplished. An example of a comprehensive mission statement is: to work collaboratively to prepare students to be productive, responsible citizens through effective instruction in a safe, caring, supportive learning environment. A concise mission statement, for the purpose of this study and participant selection, is one which is composed of one or two specific items or actions to be accomplished. An example of a concise mission statement is: to prepare students to be productive, responsible citizens. This variation in selection allowed for differences in mission statement type to be considered in connection with the utilization of the mission statement.
- **Grade Level Served by the Principal:** In Nebraska, each district defines the configuration of grades in a school. In a small district, one principal might serve a single school with grades Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 (PK-12). A larger district might have one principal serving the elementary school and one principal serving

the secondary school. Even larger districts have elementary, middle, and high schools and principals for these different schools. The role of principal is directly influenced by both the size of school and the grade levels served by the school (Lunenburg, 2010; Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008). In order to understand practices of principals from across the state, I studied principals who serve a variety of grade levels from various sized schools across the state. To achieve this, I interviewed two principals who served in K-12 or PK-12 schools, two elementary and two high school principals that served in districts with elementary and secondary schools, and two elementary, two middle school, and two high school principals from districts that have elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. At each school level one of the principals served at a school with a comprehensive mission statement, and the other principal served at a school with a concise mission statement.

- **School Location:** In order to study principals from across the state, I visited schools across the state. To achieve the intended representation of schools from across the state, I attempted to choose schools from each of the six legislative districts as defined by the Nebraska School Activities Association (n.d.). One legislative district was not represented in the final pool of schools.
- **Principal Tenure:** As tenure is earned on the first day of the fourth year as principal at a school, this was a natural line of demarcation between principals who are new in their school and those who have been at a school long enough to have made it their own. Eleven of the principals selected for this study were serving in at least their fourth year as principal at their school. The twelfth

principal was hired the year before his school opened to open the school. He was in his third year at this school when he participated in this study. He was included in the study because he was the only principal the school had to that point. It was, by definition, his school.

The creation of the pool of candidates for participation was created through the compilation of multiple databases and internet searches. The Nebraska Department of Education's (NDE) three lists of principals for the 2018-2019 school year served as the foundation for the participant pool; those three lists were: elementary principals, middle school principals, and secondary principals (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.). These lists were compiled, and duplicate entries were removed. Once this compiled database was cleaned, the Nebraska School Activities Association database of *Schools by District* (n.d.) was used to place the principals of schools, and their school district, within the proper legislative district within the state. Once this information was added to the database, the length of tenure of each principal was added from the *Administrator Salaries 2018-2019 Principals* (Nebraska Council of School Administrators, 2018) list. Principals who were identified as being in their current position for less than three years were removed from the participant pool, as were superintendents who also serve as principal at a school within their district. The final step to create the participant pool was the addition of school mission statements to the database. To do this, I searched the school and district of each eligible principal to find the school's mission statement. If the school used the district's mission statement as its own, and if the mission statement was actionable – if it could be used to fulfill the four most often stated purposes of a mission statement – the mission statement was added to the database, completing the entry.

The schools were then sorted by school mission type, grade-level served, and location of the school to create a selection matrix of six columns and six rows. The columns of the table hold the NSAA legislative district number (1-6), and the rows of the table will hold six different combinations of school type and grade level served (Concise PK/K-12, Concise Elementary/Secondary, Concise Elementary/Middle/High School, Comprehensive PK/K-12, Comprehensive Elementary/Secondary, and Comprehensive Elementary/Middle/High School). Once the schools were placed in this table, eligible principals were contacted via email to gain interest in participation in the study. If the principal was interested, the principal investigator contacted the superintendent of the district to obtain permission to pursue the study. Once this permission was granted, the investigator confirmed agreement to participate with the principal. The first school/district of each identified type in which the principal(s) and superintendent agreed to participate was the district chosen to participate in the study.

Table 2*Number of Eligible School Districts*

	NSAA LD1	NSAA LD2	NSAA LD3	NSAA LD4	NSAA LD5	NSAA LD6	Total Eligible School Districts
Concise, PK/K-12 School	0	4	2	3	3	0	12
Concise, Elementary/Secondary Schools	3	5	2	7	2	3	23
Concise, Elementary/Middle/High Schools	1	2	0	2	0	3	8
Comprehensive, PK/K-12 School	2	0	5	3	3	4	17

Comprehensive, Elementary/Secondary Schools	5	7	5	9	1	3	30
Comprehensive, Elementary/Middle/High Schools	2	3	0	3	2	3	14
Total Eligible School Districts	13	21	14	27	12	16	103

Data Collection Procedures

Upon agreeing to participate in the interviews, the principals received a “Confirmation Letter” (Appendix A) that outlined their involvement in the study and thanked them for their willingness to participate in this study. Following the receipt of the confirmation letter, the participant and the principal investigator communicated via telephone, text, and/or email to establish an interview date, and the principal investigator shared the pre-interview materials. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to complete an “Informed Consent Form” (Appendix B) and a “Participant Information Survey” (Appendix C). They were also asked to collect the materials identified in the “List of Materials Requested” (Appendix D) for the document analysis.

Data was collected from multiple sources: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Though interviews in qualitative research tend to be unstructured and open-ended (Creswell, 2014), the interview process for this multicase study was semi-structured with set questions and predetermined follow-up questions being asked (Appendix E). There was room in the process for asking clarifying questions and additional follow-up questions. As the goal of this multicase study was to perform both within-case and cross-case analyses, the more formalized structure of these interviews improved the effectiveness of the across-case analysis.

One interview was held with each principal. The interview was a single session, with two parts. In the first part, participants were asked about their leadership, management, and improvement practices within the context of the *Teacher & Principal Performance Framework* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). These questions were clustered around eight practices: establishing and communicating a vision for learning; developing relationships; leading continuous school improvement; providing instructional leadership; building a professional community; managing the organization, operations, and resources of the school; creating a school culture; and acting with fairness, integrity, and professionalism (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). Participants were provided these questions prior to the interview date to give them the opportunity to prepare their answers. In part two of the interview, the researcher asked the participant two mission-specific questions about each of the identified practices:

- How does the mission of the school guide and inform your practices?
- How do your practices help achieve the school's mission?

There were general probing follow-up questions written for each of these questions, and for some questions, specific written follow-ups were asked. The interviews were held at the principal's school, over the course of the 2019 fall semester.

The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device and transcribed by an automated service. Transcripts were personally checked for accuracy following the interviews. The principal researcher kept a field journal to record supplemental notes, thoughts, reactions, and reflections following each interview.

Interviews, however, were just one of the methods of data collection in this study. As is typical with case study research, observations and document analysis were included

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case study research, unlike most qualitative studies, need not be limited to qualitative evidence. “Case studies can include... quantitative evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 17). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support this approach, clearly stating that “some case studies employ both qualitative and quantitative methods” (p. 37). In order to obtain data that was meaningful to both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis, and to allow for a repeatable process across cases, a structured Site Observation Protocol (Appendix F) and a structured Evidence Analysis Protocol (Appendix G) was used.

Site observations occurred following the principal interviews at the school. These consisted of an observation of the principal’s office and a walk-through of the building, classrooms, and other public spaces. During the process, the investigator looked for evidence that the mission was posted and used throughout the school. This evidence included: banners, posters, or signs containing the school mission statement. If found, this evidence of how the mission was reinforced in these locations was recorded. This data helped supplement the responses provided during the principal interview, specifically those related to communication, relationship building, and culture building.

Evidence analysis of the documentation provided at each school occurred following each of the individual interviews. For each item requested, the document was reviewed and the presence and utilization of the mission within the document was recorded. The documents requested from each principal were: student and faculty handbooks, school letterhead, certified and classified staff evaluation tools, instructional models, mentoring programs, materials used for the most recent school improvement visit, current school improvement cycle plan and materials, questions used during hiring, building resource usage and improvement planning documents, culture/climate

assessment tools, and curriculum guides/course catalogs. The scale used in the Evidence Analysis Protocol was a three-point scale focused on presence and use of the mission statement: (1) Not Referred To; (2) Stated; or (3) Stated and Explained. In instances where the mission was stated, or stated and explained, evidence of this inclusion was recorded. The researcher hoped each school would provide all of the requested materials. If they did not, the item was skipped in the analysis. Upon conclusion of the study, evidence provided by participants was electronically scanned and stored in a digital archive created by the researcher. Participants were provided with copies of their individual case study to verify accuracy of the information captured for that case study.

Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was held to refine and clarify the questions and process. The selection of a pilot interview candidate highlighted one challenge in this process: to select a participant, the school must have an appropriate mission statement. The first candidate identified for a possible pilot interview would have met all the characteristics, but the mission statement was not written in the form of a purpose statement; it was written as a slogan. The vision statement provided on their website could have been used as the mission statement, but that is not the purpose of the study. Therefore, this potential candidate was not selected. The participant chosen for the pilot interview met the selection criteria and qualified as a K-12 principal at a school with a concise mission statement and was in his eighth year as principal at his school.

The pilot interview lasted one hour and forty-five minutes. The interview would be conducted in two parts, in the same sitting. Part one asked participants about the work they do, and part two specifically asked about the mission and the principals' utilization

of it. Prior to the interview, the principal received the 58 questions to part one. The question set included the larger questions, plus some specific follow-up questions. The principal indicated he had looked at the questions prior to the interview. It showed, as he was able to provide thoughtful and detailed responses to the questions when asked. In part two, when the questions moved from general practices to specific questions about the mission, how the principal knows if the school has achieved its mission, and how the principal uses the mission in his daily practices, he struggled. When asked to tell me the school's mission, he could not. He visually scanned his office walls and desk, but could not find the mission. He did not know his school's mission, but identified the school's slogan that is listed on the school website and letterhead, and he claimed that as the mission. As expected, when he knew he was being asked about the mission, he framed his answers around the "mission." He knew there was supposed to be a right answer.

In conducting the site observation and evidence analysis as a part of this pilot interview, the absence of the mission statement continued. The mission was not observed anywhere within the building, and it was only present in the student handbooks and school improvement presentation. The placement in both seemed to be in compliance, rather than as part of the overall communication strategy, or message, of the principal. Within the actual interview, we did discuss posting the mission in the building. The school is in a new building this year, and the walls are bare. He said they have not posted the mission, and he had not really thought of using the mission in that way. The slogan is posted on the sign outside the school welcoming visitors.

The pilot interview was a positive experience and benefited the study. Based on responses to the interview questions, the principal in my field trial did not actively utilize

the school's mission statement as he engaged in his daily practices. There are factors this principal considered, including technology utilization and how to do what they want to do with the limited resources they have as a school, but the mission statement was not a factor actively considered. It was not used to provide context for making decisions, but the mission was used to justify actions after the fact, when questions specifically addressed the mission statement. This reinforced my concern that once a principal knew the discussion was about mission statements, they would frame their answers to fit the question.

Data Analysis Procedures

Determining and selecting the participants and developing an effective and efficient set of data collection protocols is only the beginning of this process. Once data collection begins, so does analysis; the processes happen together “hand-in-hand” (Creswell, 2014, p. 195). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identify collection and analysis as “simultaneous” (p. 195) processes. When data are collected, sense must be made of it, and analysis is how we make that sense (Creswell, 2014).

As data are broken down into small pieces, the researcher must also begin the process of bringing those pieces back together (Creswell, 2014). This begins with the process of coding, or representing chunks of data with a word or code. The codes are then examined for patterns, and as patterns emerge, themes within the patterns emerge (Stake, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These themes, when collected and examined, are used to address the study’s research questions which is the purpose of conducting the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the analysis and synthesis process as “recursive and dynamic” (p. 195) and “inductive and comparative” (p. 201). The process is messy and complex and requires the researcher to move back and forth between data and analysis repeatedly, continually moving between the broken-down data and the emerging concepts. It requires the researcher to use both inductive and deductive reasoning, and to both interpret and describe the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); and the process varies for different research approaches.

In multicase study research, there are two parts to the data analysis phase: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first part of a multicase study is within-case analysis, which provides “a detailed description of each case and themes within the case” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 100). This initial, within-case analysis is then followed by cross-case analysis, which is a “thematic analysis across the cases” (p. 100) where assertions and interpretations of the meaning of the multicase study can be provided (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis process during each part of the multicase study follows the same general structure.

Analysis begins with the collection of data, which was completed through interviews, observations, and evidence analysis. As the data were collected, within-case analysis began by looking for emerging patterns and themes in the data. These emerging patterns and themes were uncovered through the coding process. Three types of first-cycle coding were utilized in this study: In Vivo, Concept, and Holistic (Saldaña, 2016). In Vivo coding uses the participant’s own words in a literal-sense, as direct quotes are used as the words or short phrases pulled from the data. Concept coding goes a step beyond the verbatim process of In Vivo coding, and strives to find a “bigger picture”

(Saldaña, 2016, p. 120) within the response. Finding the ideas suggested within the participant's response is the goal of Concept coding. Holistic coding, is yet another step removed from the direct words of the participant, toward analysis. The goal of Holistic coding is to capture the basic themes of the participant's response, rather than a word-by-word, or line-by-line analysis, as is done in In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). Together, these three types of first-cycle coding began the pattern and theme discovery process. Some of these patterns may be found in the field notes taken immediately following the interviews and site observations, or in the notes taken while performing evidence analysis (Stake, 1995). As the analysis progresses, Pattern coding will occur. Pattern coding is the process of summarizing patterns and themes that have emerged from the data, and looking for connections between the patterns and themes, reducing the number of patterns, themes, and categories from a large number to a smaller number (Saldaña, 2016). As these patterns and themes emerge, those themes are revealed that align with and provide evidence that addresses the research questions for the individual cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal for multicase study is different than for single case study, and as such, there is an additional layer of analysis, the cross-case analysis.

In this second layer of analysis, patterns and themes from across the cases are sought out. A similar coding process was used in this second layer of analysis, beginning with a new type of coding, Descriptive, and then moving forward with Concept and Holistic Coding, followed by second-cycle Pattern coding. Descriptive coding is the summarization of “the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). Descriptive coding will replace In Vivo coding in this second layer of analysis because it was an analysis of the investigator’s findings, rather than the participant’s

words. The patterns and themes which emerge from this multiple-style and multicycle coding process will help to develop an understanding of the findings across the cases. This is an essential part of multicase analysis, because in multicase analysis the goal is to produce generalizations. Multicase studies are especially good for producing generalizations because, as Stake (1995) states, “Cases seldom exist alone. If there’s one, there are surely more somewhere” (p. 72). In order to best provide generalizations through the findings, the results of the single cases must be removed from the individual situations in which they are found and studied as a merged collective (Stake, 2006).

Yin (2018) suggests situating these code-, theme-, and pattern-finding efforts within the theoretical framework of the study and encourages researchers to return to the “original objectives and design of the case study” (p. 168) which “reflected a set of research questions and a review of literature” (p. 168). By returning to the original framework of the study during the cross-case analysis, patterns and themes can generate generalizable answers to the research sub-questions of this study, which can lead to generalizable answers to the core research question of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These generalizations can be made because they are grounded, not in the individual cases, but in the cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018), and can lead the researcher to “greater insight [into] the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions... posed at the outset of the study” (Yin, 2018, p. 38).

The process described above was used by the researcher to conduct this study. At the completion of each interview and site observation which utilized the Interview Protocol (Appendix E) and the Site Observation protocol (Appendix F), the researcher recorded notes, pertinent thoughts, or connections made during these processes in my

field journal. During the visit with the participant, the researcher collected the evidence requested in the initial conversation (Appendix D). This evidence was analyzed using the Evidence Analysis protocol (Appendix G). The interview was transcribed verbatim by an automated service and then line checked for accuracy. The interview transcript was analyzed through a combination of first-cycle hand-coding measures: In Vivo, Concept, and Holistic coding; from this initial cycle of coding, the second-cycle coding method of Pattern coding was utilized, as patterns and themes emerged from the data by grouping codes into similar categories, themes, or concepts (Saldaña, 2016). As patterns and themes emerged, so did authentic answers to the research questions, grounded in the participant's interview responses, and the researcher's site observations and evidence analysis. At this point, the individual case analysis was concluded. Following the completion of individual case analysis, the analysis process continued with cross-case analysis as the researcher coded the within-case analyses using the first-cycle coding methods of Descriptive, Concept, and Holistic, followed by second-cycle Pattern coding, which uncovered themes and patterns. Finally, the researcher considered the whole case in order to uncover generalizable findings for the multicase study.

Data Verification Procedures

All this analysis loses its value if the findings are not verifiable, and verifiability is an issue all qualitative researchers face. There are traditionally two components to data verification: validity and reliability. In qualitative research, there are three aspects of validity and reliability: internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

Internal Validity

Verifiable research findings match the participant's reality. The alignment of the researcher's findings and the reality of the participant is referred to as a study's credibility, or internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As part of establishing credibility, the study and its results must "ring true" to the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following collection of strategies were undertaken to establish the credibility of the study by creating a holistic picture of the individual cases and the multicase study and to ensure the internal validity of this study: triangulation, initial data collection accuracy, member checks, and clarification of researcher biases and beliefs.

Triangulation is the process of gathering and analyzing multiple sources of evidence to support the findings of the study (Yin, 2018), and is "a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245) of research. For each case in this multicase study, interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis were conducted to create the most complete picture of each principal and their intentional utilization of the school's mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their school. This triangulation between the interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis allowed the researcher to measure the words of principals against their actions and practices as revealed across the observations and documentation collected and analyzed and create a rich picture of each principal's utilization of their school mission statement.

In order to record the words of the participants as accurately as possible, interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. This step allowed the researcher to capture, transcribe, and analyze the participant's true words through In Vivo

coding, rather than relying on notes taken by the principal investigator during the interview.

In qualitative studies, such as this multicase study, participants can serve as a checking method to “ensure the truth” (Creswell, 2014, p. 210) of the analysis and findings of the researcher. Upon completion of the initial analysis, findings reviews by the participants, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), were conducted to determine if the findings of the individual case studies “ring true” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 246) to the participants and their own reality.

Clearly stating the researcher’s bias as part of the study is known as reflexivity and can be an important part of case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In doing so, researchers acknowledge their biases, dispositions, and assumptions, and then suspend them to the degree possible for the duration of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to allow each case and its evidence to be viewed with minimal bias. The researcher’s biases and beliefs are shared as part of the final report in Chapter 3.

External Validity

Verifiable research findings are generalizable. “Cases seldom exist alone. If there is one, there are surely more somewhere. We have both a specific interest and a general interest” (Stake, 1995, p. 72). This general interest, or generalizability, is the focus of external validity. In qualitative cases, these generalizations are assertions grounded in the data, and extrapolated by the researcher (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to help the study ring true to non-participants who have a general interest in the study. External validity in this study was established through three main factors: cross-case analysis, the use of maximum variation sampling, and the clarification of researcher biases and beliefs.

At the heart of multicase study research, is cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis is a thematic analysis conducted across cases in an attempt to determine which themes are “common and different to all cases” (p. 322) within the multicase study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The individual cases were analyzed through cross-case analysis to create a meaningful description of the collective use of school mission statements by these principals from across the state of Nebraska.

Utilizing a maximum variation sampling strategy involves purposely selecting participants, through pre-established criteria, from a wide range of possibilities to increase the possible variation in responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This selection process allows the research findings to be applicable to a greater range of readers, because of the greater range of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to create greater analytic generalizability, participants were selected through the pre-established criteria discussed earlier.

By stating and acknowledging the researcher’s existing biases and beliefs at the outset of the study, the researcher remained cognizant of potential bias and intentionally focused on whether the findings of the study are consistent with, or contrary to, their predicted outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reliability

Verifiable research findings are consistent with the data collected which makes the study reliable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reliability in this multicase study was established through clarification of researcher biases and beliefs, standardized data collection protocols, the creation of a case study database and chain of evidence, and an external findings review.

By acknowledging the researcher's biases and beliefs at the outset of the study and setting them aside to the degree possible, the researcher remained cognizant of potential bias and intentionally focused on whether the findings of the study are consistent with, or contrary to, the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study utilized standardized data collection protocols for the semi-structured interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis. Providing this structure in the protocols increased the reliability of data collected in each individual case study, leading to greater consistency of data available across cases and a greater reliability of the analysis and findings of the multicase study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Creating and using a case study database creates a defined repository for those interested in the data, observations, and evidence collected should they have a desire to inspect the sources of evidence, beyond reading the report (Yin, 2018). Creation of the database creates transparency in the study and allows others to review the findings if they choose. A case study database was utilized and maintained to organize and make the data and evidence accessible throughout the individual- and cross-case analyses. The creation of the case study database and the use of clear citations of evidence throughout the analysis and findings portions of the study create a clear chain of evidence (Yin, 2018). This chain of evidence allows the reader to move through the study, backward and forward, from "initial research questions to ultimate case study findings" (p. 134). A Data Collection Matrix (Appendix I) is included in the chain of evidence.

To ensure the findings are consistent with the data collected and plausible to another practitioner scholar, the findings of the study were externally reviewed for

verification. To determine this, the external reviewer was given access to the evidence and data collected, and asked to review it to determine if the findings were “consistent with the data collected” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 251). Conducting an external findings review ensured the findings were consistent with what another researcher may find. The results of the review are included in Appendix L.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam and Tisdell (2016), recognize that ethical dilemmas may arise throughout the research process. These dilemmas may occur as part of data collection, in the dissemination of the findings, and because of the researcher’s relationship with the participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that ethical issues may occur “prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in conducting data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing the study” (p. 54). A number of steps were taken to ensure ethical practices were undertaken throughout the process.

One dilemma arising from this study was connected to the primary investigator’s role as an accreditation external visit team member. For those principals participating in this study, the researcher had an intimate look at their thoughts, words, and practices. This could potentially compromise membership on the external visit team. To avoid this dilemma, the researcher will decline any invitations to participate on the external visit team for the schools whose principals participated in the study. This way, any preconceived opinions based on the data collected through the study will not compromise the outcome of the external visit.

Prior to beginning the data collection process, the researcher received approval from the Doane University Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB requires the

researcher to be aware of what Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to as “ethical issues” (p. 54) and have “plans for addressing ethical issues” (p. 54). As part of this process, the principal investigator completed the National Health Institute’s “Protecting Human Research Participants” training as required by the Doane IRB. This online training prepares the investigator to conduct research that does not exploit participants. After securing approval for conducting the study from the Doane IRB, the principal investigator began contacting potential participants. Once interested principals were found, the principal investigator secured approval from key gatekeepers at the schools and districts in which the participants were selected. After securing approval from the schools and districts to conduct research within their district, potential participants were officially invited to participate in the study.

As the study was conducted, the researcher stored all data and evidence in a safe and locked place, and it remained so until the conclusion of the study. Upon conclusion of the study, identifiable information was removed from the data and evidence, and the data and evidence collected throughout the study was electronically scanned and stored in a password-protected cloud-based digital archive created by the researcher. The physical materials were destroyed after being scanned. The digital archive will be preserved for no less than seven years.

To ensure the safety and ethical treatment of the research participants, informed consent was obtained prior to the participant’s involvement with the study. Participants were provided with an Informed Consent Form which provided and explained participants’ rights, as well as the responsibilities of researchers in the research process. The Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) was provided to participants who then signed

and returned the form to the principal investigator prior to beginning the process of data collection. The informed consent form addressed the following components:

1. The purpose of the study.
2. The anticipated interview format and time commitment associated with participation.
3. A list of any known risks and benefits to participation in the study.
4. Assurances of the participant's right to confidentiality and anonymity.
5. Compensation provided to participants for involvement in the research process.
6. Information related to the Institutional Review Board, including IRB contact information.
7. Disclosure of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw from the study.
8. Consent to participate in the study.
9. The participant's right to receive a copy of the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction of Participants

The findings of this multicase study are presented in this chapter. This multicase study explored the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. In order to better understand how principals are using their mission statements, the leadership, management, and improvement practices of twelve principals from public schools across Nebraska were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews, site observations, and examination of current document artifacts. The first six participants serve at schools with concise mission statements, and the final six participants serve at schools with comprehensive mission statements. The twelve participant principals varied by grade level: Two principals were selected who serve in K-12 or PK-12 schools; two elementary and two high school principals that serve in districts with elementary and secondary schools; and two elementary, two middle school, and two high school principals from districts that have elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. At each school level one of the principals served at a school with a concise mission statement, and the other principal served at schools with a comprehensive mission statement. Any and all information obtained during this study that could identify a participant was kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were used for participants and their schools.

The first layer of data analysis began with the interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher began the within-case analysis by looking for emerging themes and patterns in the data. These emerging themes and patterns were uncovered through the coding processes. These themes were then used to address the research

questions of the study. Additional data were collected through the site observation and evidence analysis which specifically addressed the principals use of the mission statement.

At the core of this multicase study was one central question: How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission to lead, manage, and improve their schools? Eight sub-questions, built upon the eight effective practices of principals from the *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017), framed the interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis in order to explore, identify, and describe:

- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's vision for teaching and learning;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's development of relationships with students, staff, families, and the community;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the school's continuous improvement process;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school;
- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's efforts to create an effective school culture; and

- How the mission of the school guides and informs the principal's interpretation and implementation of local, state, and national educational policies.

One additional sub-question, inspired by Wiggins and McTighe (2007) and Collins (2005), was asked: How does the principal know if the school has achieved its mission?

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the selection criteria and research questions posed in this case study. Section two presents the results of the individual case studies for the twelve participating principals and an account of their decisions and actions as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. The third and final section presents the themes that emerged through the cross-case analysis of the individual case studies. Data were reported and organized by research question to uniformly present each individual principal's contribution to the study as a whole.

Case Study #1 - Dr. Susan Jones, John Adams Elementary School

Dr. Susan Jones is the elementary principal at John Adams Elementary, one of multiple elementary schools in the John Adams school district. Dr. Jones describes herself as a good communicator, growth-oriented, and a good developer of people.

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

When Dr. Jones was given the opportunity to open John Adams Elementary School, she intentionally started the school with a vision toward collaboration and consensus and toward developing the foundational skills students will need to be successful in the future. The culture to achieve this vision was built collaboratively by Dr. Jones and the team of teachers she selected to help start the school.

Goals are set through a collaborative process, she says. Communication creates a foundation for collaborative work, and allows her team to build consensus as they work toward achieving goals. Dr. Jones's primary goal is to help "build the best student" possible. In order to make this happen, Dr. Jones hopes to build a school where students will learn to: 1) like school, 2) love learning, and 3) develop the foundational skills they will need to be successful in the future. Dr. Jones believes a growth-oriented mindset is key to achieving these goals.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Relationships, according to Dr. Jones, are "the most important part of my job" and relationship-building is one of her strengths. Relationships built on trust, honesty, and openness are important to Dr. Jones because they form the foundation for the hard conversations and hard work required to help her students grow and develop. Some of the specific relationships Dr. Jones works to maintain are: the school/community relationship, the school/family relationship, the school/student relationship, the student/administrator relationship, and the staff member/administrator relationship.

For these various teams and relationships to grow and develop, there must be good communication. Dr. Jones prefers to communicate through one-to-one conversations, but she uses other methods as well. She sends out a weekly email in which she shares information, resources, news, upcoming events, and tips, though she recognizes not all parents read it. In her communications, Dr. Jones explains the reasons behind her actions and decisions and continually shares the message, "We are an excellent school. We *were* great. We worked to make improvements and grow, and now we are excellent."

John Adams Elementary uses social media to communicate with parents and the community. With parents, ClassDojo is the most commonly used social media tool. It provides a look into the classroom through pictures and video, and allows the school to connect parents and the classroom in a positive way. The school uses Twitter to connect the school with the community and parents by communicating upcoming events, sharing pictures, and spreading positive messages to the community.

Recently, the John Adams school district and John Adams Elementary specifically have been seeing steady change in their demographics and achievement levels due to increasing enrollment. As the district has grown, the Board of Education and administrators have consciously worked to maintain the feel and mentality of John Adams Public Schools. Growth, though, is causing changes. Dr. Jones's responses to these changes have been focused on determining how to maintain their traditional culture, expectations, and achievement and how to adapt to bring their new families and students to those levels.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

John Adams Elementary School's yearly school improvement process is built around developing a plan to meet student and teacher needs, with the ultimate goal of helping students develop the foundational skills they will need in the future. This process includes three steps: setting goals, selecting and implementing goal achievement strategies, and monitoring progress.

The goal-setting process is collaborative and data-driven and begins with the Professional Learning Community (PLC) teams. The primary focus of this team data study is student performance and growth on standardized and common assessment data.

From this analysis, the PLC teams and individual teachers set yearly goals. Once PLC team goals have been set, school staff members come together to begin creating a building goal.

The building goal-setting process is similar to the PLC team process. If a specific overarching goal cannot be set based on the shared PLC team goals, the building team will set a “big umbrella” goal, which encompasses the PLC team goals but does not directly address specific team goals. Once the building-level goal is selected, PLC teams begin the process of determining the research-based strategies and supports they will incorporate to achieve the building- and PLC-team goals. Data study will then be used to monitor progress toward the achievement of the building and team goals.

The process John Adams Elementary uses is an incremental improvement process. It is expected to support the existing curriculum, be easily implemented, and be based on the current needs of students and teachers. The process is intended to strengthen what already exists and what the school is, and it must not lead to becoming something they are not or do not want to be. This idea is supported because they are an excellent school and are in a position to reinforce existing practices rather than to implement all new practices. Even though it is an incremental process, Dr. Jones believes the school improvement process is “fragmented” and is not as strong as other processes used in the school. Ultimately, Dr. Jones would like the school improvement process to fully tie together the efforts from PLC-team work, goal setting, and progress monitoring.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Dr. Jones is growth-oriented and has developed this mindset in her team. As an instructional leader, Dr. Jones is continually pushing her team to help students grow and

achieve. Two big components of this growth, development, and achievement are curriculum and instruction. Dr. Jones believes in teacher autonomy, but she also believes in ensuring fidelity to the curriculum and instructional strategies selected. Dr. Jones's role in instruction is to communicate expectations, to model best practices, to support teachers, to evaluate, to coach for improvement, and to teach teachers. The John Adams Elementary staff has the professional autonomy to determine how they teach the district curriculum, but they are checked upon to ensure curricular fidelity. Checks are performed through the appraisal process, walk-throughs, lesson-plan checks, informal conversations, and student-data checks. To Dr. Jones, this is part of the continual communication process essential to assuring the use of effective instructional practices.

Curricular expectations, which have been developed at the district level with input from Dr. Jones, her interventionists, her teachers, and their peers from other buildings, are communicated through the curricular scope and sequences. Lesson plans and lesson-plan checks are used to guarantee fidelity to the prescribed curriculum. Dr. Jones evaluates curricular effectiveness by being in classrooms, looking at lesson plans, and looking at data to determine what is and is not working.

Non-curricular programs are evaluated in a variety of ways. Dr. Jones considers student interest and participation, the goals of the program, and the level to which the program supports the regular learning environment. She is able to collect this information through climate surveys and informal conversations.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Dr. Jones has clear expectations for her staff. She expects them to be professional, to put kids first, and to have a passion for teaching. Professionals, according to Dr. Jones,

learn from their mistakes, are where they are supposed to be, and have one another's backs. If her people behave as professionals, she treats them as professionals.

Dr. Jones regularly reminds her people they are a team. Teams take time to build, and there are three ways she is continually building her team: through the hiring process, through the development of personal and professional connections, and through the professional development of her existing staff members. Dr. Jones believes that recruiting and selecting people has been her "best success." In interviews, Dr. Jones looks for a passion for teaching and for answers that are student-centered. When she started, Dr. Jones went on gut feeling. Today, she knows what she is looking for and waits to hear or see it. From the moment a new teacher is hired, Dr. Jones welcomes them, and works to connect them with the school and their new peers.

Team building is about personal and professional connections at John Adams Elementary. The staff participates in a number of activities designed to build connections and encourage teachers to support one another. Dr. Jones, an active participant in these activities, believes having these types of relationships provides a foundation for the tough conversations needed for improvement.

Dr. Jones is able to help teachers improve by seeing and playing to their strengths. She has the same growth orientation for her staff members as she has for her students. Professional development is based on the needs of the staff and students, and is informed by data, trends, observation, and staff input. Dr. Jones looks for professional development opportunities that are practical and can be implemented right away. Professional development is also based on teacher preparedness for upcoming district initiatives.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Dr. Jones feels a strong financial and social responsibility to the community.

When she makes financial decisions, she works to get the “most bang for the buck,” and “to dedicate resources to what is going to impact students the most.” Dr. Jones tends to spend resources more readily on people than materials. She looks to build connections with and for kids, because “at the elementary... level, I think the relationships come first.” Dr. Jones believes student social-emotional wellness comes from relationships, which can, in turn, lead to academic readiness.

Dr. Jones’s social responsibility is fed by her financial responsibility. The people in this community pay “high taxes” with the school serving as “the focal point for the community.” The school, built to meet the community’s needs, is a community resource and is used regularly by community clubs, teams, and organizations. As the community’s focal point, the perception of the school is important to Dr. Jones. She believes the community’s perception of the school and their beliefs about “what’s going on inside” are built through the appearance of, and access to, the building and grounds. As such, Dr. Jones works to ensure the building and grounds are kept clean and neat.

Beyond community perception and financial responsibility, Dr. Jones has one additional touchstone for decision-making: the educational needs of students. She wants to make decisions that will help kids get ready to learn. Her disciplinary decisions are based on this, as are her financial and instructional decisions. Dr. Jones believes student discipline is about learning. When setting and reviewing policies, Dr. Jones looks for common issues, patterns, and trends. School-wide policies are then developed by responding to the question, “How can we change the factors leading to these issues?”

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Dr. Jones describes the culture of John Adams Elementary as inviting, warm, fun, and open. She says people are proud of the school: “They are proud of being from John Adams Elementary. They are proud of being from John Adams.” As Dr. Jones was planning for John Adams Elementary to open, she had a vision for the school and culture she wanted and built it intentionally by hiring “good people” with “a passion for teaching.” Dr. Jones knows her school has good community and family support.

Beyond the teachers, students, parents, and community, the most important piece of this culture is the acceptance of, and openness to, everyone’s opinion. Dr. Jones reaches out to parents and community members to welcome them, inviting them into the school to discuss and celebrate the growth and development of the school and its students. Each student at John Adams Elementary has an individual behavior or academic growth target at their appropriate level, which allows them to have the opportunity to grow and be celebrated. Regular celebrations are important to the families and teachers and motivate students.

Assessing this culture requires a number of tools. Dr. Jones assesses the school climate through surveys, and by recording and measuring attendance at parent-teacher conferences. She reaches out to families to get them in the school, talking about and engaged in their children’s educations. These conversations help Dr. Jones develop a good feel for the climate and culture at John Adams Elementary School.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Dr. Jones views her role as principal as one related to public relations. She believes she is a provider of resources and opportunities to grow, who enables everyone

else in the school to do their work. Dr. Jones feels responsible for the school and everyone in it. "I have to take care of them," she says.

Ethical practice, to Dr. Jones, is built on honesty, trustworthiness, and making decisions in the best interests of everyone. She models these characteristics by being visible, doing what she says, and by showing people how it is done. She works to be transparent and focuses on respecting and trusting her people personally and professionally. Dr. Jones uses her decision-making and thought processes to align decisions and actions by understanding the big picture, thinking of all the scenarios, and determining their possible impact on the system.

Different forces influence Dr. Jones's decisions and actions. A number of external forces exert influence on the school, including legislators and legislation, and board members and board policy. Legislators, she feels, often have the right intentions, but do not understand the practicality or implications of their ideas. With their well-intentioned but misdirected legislation, legislators can negatively impact teachers, the learning environment, and kids. The John Adams Board of Education and their policies are also a big factor influencing Dr. Jones's vision for the school. Their policies directly impact the work being done in the individual schools and for individual students. Additionally, Dr. Jones recognizes the district vision and mission as a part of her vision for the school.

Themes and Summary

Two major themes emerged from the interview with Dr. Jones. The first was her focus on excellence. The second was her vision for education and the future of her school. Dr. Jones believed John Adams Elementary School is an excellent school, and she believed their test scores support this belief. As such, her focus was on managing the

growth and development of the students, teachers, and school, not on leading for systemic change or improvement. Dr. Jones's improvement efforts were focused on strengthening what already exists. For this reason, improvement at John Adams Elementary occurs incrementally. As Dr. Jones discussed numerous times, new strategies and interventions need to fit within the current practices of John Adams Elementary and need to be implemented smoothly and easily.

Dr. Jones had a clear vision for where she wants to take the school and was leading her staff to get there. The biggest challenge facing John Adams Elementary, and the challenge was stretching Dr. Jones the furthest, was the integration of new families. Dr. Jones, the Board of Education, and the community all want to keep the culture and feel of John Adams Elementary and the district as it has been, and they actively work to assimilate newcomers into the existing culture. The impact of the new families and changing demographics of the district are felt at the classroom, school, and community level, and responses to these changes are being made at each of those levels.

Dr. Jones was involved in the process of writing and revising the district's mission statement. When asked about the mission statement, Dr. Jones could not state the mission off the top of her head, but she did immediately identify the safe, caring environment component and remembered the importance of success in the future.

Dr. Jones does not specifically use the mission as a tool. It was not explicitly shown or communicated throughout the school beyond the wall in the front office where the mission was posted. When touring the facility, it seemed to be a welcoming and engaging environment, but there was no additional visual evidence of the school's

mission. While the district's mission was stated in official school-building documents, it seemed to be a required inclusion.

One cannot positively confirm Dr. Jones's explicit utilization of the mission statement in her day-to-day work or in the work her staff, because it was not regularly or explicitly referenced. Her responses suggested that Dr. Jones does not intentionally consider the mission as part of her day-to-day practices.

Case Study #2 - Mr. Josh Connor, John Adams Middle School

Mr. Josh Connor is the middle school principal at John Adams Middle School. He is the first principal of the school, and the vision for the school and the building plans were set when he accepted the position. It was his job to "bring them to life."

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Connor's vision for teaching and learning starts with one core belief, "I believe that all kids can learn. It is up to us to find out where they are and how to help them get to where we know they need to go." Mr. Connor starts by looking at a student's academic achievement and their barriers to academic achievement, including: IQ, social-emotional factors, and behaviors

Mr. Connor's personal goal is the development of the whole child. He states, "I want our kids to achieve at the highest level possible," but, he wants them to be "good people" as well. He wants students to develop the "foundation to be a good teammate, a good classmate... a good mom, a good dad." To aid in this development, Mr. Connor and his team conduct activities and bring in speakers focused on character development.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

When it comes to relationships, it is important to Mr. Connor that people know he

is available to talk and to listen. His relationships with staff, parents, and students are built on being supportive and doing what he can. If there is an issue, he addresses it by searching for win-win solutions. Mr. Connor prides himself on doing the right thing and doing what he says he will do. He believes people see this. Mr. Connor recognizes that no one is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. When he makes a mistake, he apologizes. He believes this helps him develop effective relationships with teachers, students, parents, and the community.

Mr. Connor is visible at the school and in the community, regularly attending games and events. He hopes the parents and community see him as “all in, all the time.” The community and his student’s families are very supportive. Parents show up at events, which are regularly at or over capacity. Because problems arise when people who regularly show up for events do not know about an event, Mr. Connor works with his teachers to communicate the specific time, date, and place of all events.

Mr. Connor’s main tools for consistent and effective communications and messaging are mass emails, monthly newsletters, and the school website. He does not regularly use social media. He limits the number of tools and platforms he uses because he believes using specific platforms consistently increases the effectiveness of communication.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Mr. Connor views the school improvement process as a school-wide problem-solving process. This process starts with a whole-staff data study looking for trends in achievement data. These trends are provided to the school improvement team, which is

composed of interested staff members, an administrator, a counselor, classified staff members, and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

Well-organized and well-documented meetings aid in the school improvement team's ability to communicate with their non-members and support the overall effectiveness of the school improvement team. Setting norms and determining the team's non-negotiables help meetings stay effective and efficient. Running agendas are used for note-taking during meetings. Action items are determined at the end of each meeting. Afterward, team members take care of their new responsibilities. When they reconvene, they review the notes, report on progress, and determine the next steps. Progress toward achieving their goals is monitored through goal setting. Goals are set at the building-, team-, and student-level. As they monitor their improvement progress, the team considers where they are, where they want to be, and what changes and supports are needed to achieve their goals.

John Adams Middle School is in year two of their five-year cycle. Through their work, they have determined that implementing and utilizing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) will be one of their improvement goals; they will determine their academic goal through an academic achievement data study.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Connor's role in the curriculum is tied directly to curriculum maps. While the Director of Curriculum and Instruction handles the selection of textbooks, alignment with state standards, and reviewing the curriculum, teachers develop the curriculum maps. Mr. Connor works with teachers to ensure they are teaching curriculum, as designated by the map, with fidelity. Mr. Connor also works with teachers to ensure they are covering the

state assessment's table of specifications. Throughout the year, Mr. Connor will meet with teachers to monitor progress, determine training needs, and identify issues in need of his attention. At the end of the year, teachers revisit and work with the Director of Curriculum and Instruction to adjust the curriculum maps based on their experiences.

On early dismissal days, John Adams Middle School has scheduled department meetings. Teachers review their curriculum maps and align their progress through the scope and sequence of the curriculum. Mr. Connor verifies this alignment and ensures the district's curriculum is being taught by reviewing curriculum maps, Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting notes, lesson plans, and grade distribution reports; conducting observations and walk-throughs; and having conversations with teachers.

Mr. Connor's conversations about student academic performance are driven by grade reports. These reports aggregate scores of the students in an individual teacher's classes and allow Mr. Connor and the teacher to discuss how groups of students are performing. Mr. Connor is able to use these same reports to discuss curricular and instructional effectiveness with department teams. Additional data for measuring curricular and instructional effectiveness is collected through standardized and local, common assessments. Teachers set individual student goals, teacher-based student learning objectives (SLOs), PLC goals, department goals, and school improvement goals to drive their performance. Progress toward the achievement of these goals is monitored through school improvement and PLC data studies.

John Adams Middle School has exploratory and after-school non-curricular programs. Exploratory programs introduce students to different courses offered at the high school, from career- and curricular-related courses to courses in foreign languages

and fine and performing arts. Mr. Connor indicates they also have the “typical middle school sports” which work in conjunction with the local club teams.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Connor expects his people to be professional, to communicate, and to follow the staff handbook. Being professional, to Mr. Connor, means doing the things that need to be done, even when one does not want to. Teachers are expected to communicate with him, students, and parents. Mr. Connor reviews the staff handbook at the beginning of the year, discussing required items like the social media policy, accident reporting, bullying, and suicide prevention with the staff. Mr. Connor tries to be straightforward and clear at these meetings. If the staff have questions, they are encouraged to discuss them with Mr. Connor.

John Adams Public Schools uses a traditional hiring model, but according to Mr. Connor, the district does “next to nothing” for recruiting. They do not go to college job fairs, which Mr. Connor feels is unfortunate, because it requires applicants to learn about John Adams as a community and district on their own.

John Adams Public Schools has a two-year mentoring program for new and new-to-the-district teachers, which is run by the high school principal and an elementary school principal. They have about six meetings each year. At the building level, Mr. Connor meets with his new teachers monthly. New teachers have a mentor in the building who helps them access the resources and curriculum they need. Mr. Connor meets with all year-two teachers once each semester.

Teachers in their second year and beyond work with Mr. Connor to direct their individual professional development through Professional Learning Plans (PLPs). In this

process, they have honest conversations about where the teacher is professionally, and what they need in order to improve and achieve their goals. Progress is discussed periodically throughout the year and at the end of the year.

Staff development is primarily district focused. The Director of Curriculum and Instruction creates the district staff development plan. The Director works closely with a committee of teachers, including two from the middle school. Mr. Connor shares building needs, ideas and concerns with these committee members prior to these meetings, and they return with the district vision for staff development. Together, they share those plans with the middle school staff. Building needs are derived from PLPs, evidence from walk-throughs and observations, and staff input.

The middle school uses team planning time and one of their in-service days for staff development. This staff development is usually focused on supporting the district's goals or the staff development plan, but Mr. Connor has the autonomy to make it fit their building's needs. Mr. Connor takes a two-step approach to address his building's needs that are outside of the district's staff development plan: he invites the ESU to present a generic first round of instruction, and then they return to train staff on specifics. Mr. Connor also builds one-off professional development sessions, sometimes basing these sessions around interesting articles he has read. When teachers attend external training, Mr. Connor expects them to lead a team- or building-wide discussion about it.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Connor utilizes a systems-approach to ensure effective building operations. He has implemented systematic processes for staff development, PLC meetings, and data team meetings. He and his team use systematic processes to evaluate their work and

ensure consistency within the buildings. There are times when situations outside the building affect John Adams Middle School's processes and disrupt Mr. Connor's systems, which frustrates him because they negate his systems-building efforts.

Mr. Connor relies on systems to manage his building resources. The superintendent has put specific processes in place for requesting resources, from curriculum and personnel to purchasing. In response, Mr. Connor has built data- and logic-driven systems to navigate the superintendent's processes and to allocate his building's resources.

When managing the John Adams Middle School site, facilities, equipment, and services, Mr. Connor's priority is student safety. He has built systems to ensure things are being done and done right. Mr. Connor meets with his head custodian regularly to review issues and to determine how the issues can be fixed. When discussing and reviewing expectations, rules, policies, and procedures, Mr. Connor's priority continues to be student safety, followed by ensuring minimal disruptions to the school day.

Mr. Connor strives to be flexible and understanding when reviewing and considering changes to policies, procedures, rules and expectations. When considering handbook changes, Mr. Connor proposes changes that are clear, while being both specific and general enough to address the school's needs and allow administrative flexibility. To gain support from the students, parents, and staff, Mr. Connor hosts a meeting to review these handbook changes. When reviewing district expectations and rules, Mr. Connor understands the significance and benefit of a change may be different at the district-level than it is in the building.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

The culture at John Adams Middle School is built around support and appreciation, which is demonstrated in many ways. Mr. Connor shows his support and appreciation at challenging times by bringing pop and snacks for teachers. Recognizing the good deeds of others goes beyond Mr. Connor, though: teachers recognize their peers and students, students recognize teachers, and administrators recognize staff and students. The staff and administration celebrate student performance of daily acts of kindness and doing the right thing, which reinforces and encourages positive student behaviors. This support and celebration, according to Mr. Connor, are important because they help everyone remember “we are here for one another.”

Mr. Connor builds and refines this culture through his administrative actions. When hiring, his approach is to first find a good person because “we can help them with the other pieces.” Beyond hiring, Mr. Connor and his team work to recognize and address those who may be struggling without making them uncomfortable. Additionally, he sends out a weekly email where he lets people know of current and upcoming events and what needs to be done. With the staff social committee, Mr. Connor schedules gatherings outside of and within the school day. For example, to recognize a high rating from the Nebraska Department of Education, he invited his staff to a thank-you breakfast. He is proud of the rating and hopes they are too, but he reminded people that while it is a big deal, it does not define who they are.

The most important part of the culture is the people. They have good kids, Mr. Connor says, and it is up to him and the staff “to empower them and give them opportunities to support our building mission.” Mr. Connor and his staff try to recognize

when kids are getting picked on or are making poor choices. If they see a student who seems to be struggling, Mr. Connor speaks with the student to see if they have an adult at school to talk with, and then asks the adult to keep an eye on the student. This connection provides teachers with opportunities to teach students to choose to do the right thing. Parents are also an important part of the culture, as they actively support the teachers by bringing food in for conferences and being part of a strong PTO. The staff sees these efforts and appreciates them.

Mr. Connor could evaluate the culture through formal measures like culture surveys but prefers informal measures. Because he works with staff members closely and often, Mr. Connor believes he is able to informally assess the state of the culture. He considers how much teachers like to be together outside of school. Mr. Connor feels he has good relationships with his people. Through these relationships, he is able to recognize times of stress and strain and address them.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Connor believes his job starts with being an instructional leader, but recognizes it is far more than that. It is his responsibility to ensure students and teachers have opportunities to learn and grow. It is his responsibility to communicate with his staff, students, parents, and the community. It is Mr. Connor's responsibility to let parents know if and when students are looking up dangerous or illicit material, even if it is at 10:00 on a Saturday night. He says it is his responsibility to model appropriate and effective behaviors, because how he handles and responds to adversity is the way his staff will respond. It is his responsibility to provide a safe environment to his students.

When considering ethical practice, Mr. Connor believes in approaching things the right way. He tries to model this approach by following the rules, living ethically, and making good choices. He believes the moment he does not, “someone will take a snapshot, put it out there, and social media will run away with it.” He acts and interacts with others with dignity, patience, and grace, presenting a good demeanor and disposition. Mr. Connor models a belief in the importance of growing and learning to his staff, his students, and the parents.

For Mr. Connor, modeling ethical practice and implementing local, state, and federal policy changes intersect in a simple way: these are the rules, and they must be followed. It is his responsibility to ensure handbook rules are followed, trainings are completed, and policies are followed, and that his school is doing what needs to be done. Mr. Connor acknowledges that local, state, and national policy changes do affect their building. Once Mr. Connor and the John Adams Middle School are told of changes they need to make, he says, “We adapt, and we try to do it.”

There are four major influences Mr. Connor faces in his efforts to achieve his vision for the school: legislators and legislation, parents, staff, and public perception. Legislators and legislation inevitably impact students, parents, and staff. Parents want what is best for their children, but they do not always know the state and federal requirements the school must meet. Mr. Connor sees it as his job to educate parents about what is happening at school and why it is happening. He must also educate and inform staff members, who, like parents, are working to do what is best for the students but do not always know what is required of the school. The final major influence is public perception. Mr. Connor believes that each time something terrible happens at a school,

the public asks their school what they are doing and is it enough. Mr. Connor believes these influences can be managed at the local level through effective communication.

Themes and Summary

Three prevalent themes emerged from the interview with Mr. Connor: expectations, relationships, and responsibility. Mr. Connor's coaching background seemed to be a strong influence in his leadership, management, and improvement practices. Like a coach, Mr. Connor sets expectations, clearly describes them, and trains his people to meet them. When expectations are not met, Mr. Connor has tough conversations with those who came up short of the expectations. When they are met or exceeded, Mr. Connor works to celebrate those achievements with individuals and with the team.

Relationships and responsibility were two significant factors for Mr. Connor. It was important to him to have strong relationships with his staff members and students and for them to have strong relationships with one another. He wanted each person in his building to do well, and he felt responsible for providing the support and resources they need for their academic, social-emotional, and physical well-being. This was not the only responsibility he bears. When describing his role as a principal, he indicated a few of his responsibilities were: instructional leader, learning and growth facilitator, communicator, student safety provider, and role model.

In addition to the district's mission, Mr. Connor adopted a building mission statement: "to promote learning experiences that challenge and empower students and faculty while developing the whole child and preparing them to be engaged citizens in a

new and changing world.” When Mr. Connor spoke about achieving the mission, he was speaking of his building mission.

The building mission was posted throughout the building and on a number of regularly used documents. Though Mr. Connor believed it was important to see the mission, he could not state it when asked. Mr. Connor recognized that the mission should be used as part of the school improvement process, hiring and HR processes, and planning processes, and he saw that it should be a part of the evaluation process for initiatives and programs. Despite this recognition, he did not specifically refer to it in the description of any of these processes. While the building mission was on a number of documents, and was constantly in front of people, he believed that all decisions should come back to “what is best for kids.”

Focusing on “what is best for kids” was a much more powerful force in decision-making for Mr. Connor than either the building or district mission. He referred to it more regularly and explicitly. Mr. Connor created an association between the mission and “what is best for kids,” saying, “The mission... goes back to what is best for kids.” For Mr. Connor, leading, managing, and improving his schools was not about achieving the mission, or being driven by the mission, it was about being driven by and doing “what is best for kids.”

Case Study #3 - Dr. Steve Hawthorne, John Adams High School

Dr. Steve Hawthorne serves as principal at John Adams High School. His focus as principal is “instruction and construction.”

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Dr. Hawthorne's vision for teaching and learning is provided by the school building's mission. "We want to create two- and four-year college graduates with as little college debt as possible," he says. To achieve this, they provide a "rigorous curriculum," and a "variety of Advanced Placement (AP) [and] dual enrollment offerings" which provide students with opportunities "to earn college credit prior to going to a two- or four-year school." Dr. Hawthorne places a significant focus on ACT preparation, ACT scores, and ACT score improvement, and he directs teachers to focus their SLO, PLP, PLC, department and team goals on ACT scores and score improvement.

Dr. Hawthorne has a number of goals for his school, including: having a 100% graduation rate, earning the highest average ACT composite score in the state, creating four-year college graduates with less than \$20,000 debt, and increasing alumni involvement. He wants to build a culture of excellence, but "moving the needle is hard," he says. When he stepped into this role, the "AP culture" was in its early stages. To help build it, he developed incentives for teachers who teach AP courses. He regularly communicates the impact of taking AP and dual enrollment classes and the benefits of having college credit before beginning college to students.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Dr. Hawthorne believes building professional relationships is one of his "strong points." Trust is the foundation for these relationships, and according to Dr. Hawthorne, take time to develop because people "have to trust you... before you can... build a relationship." Being "transparent" and "communicating well" has helped Dr. Hawthorne form effective relationships with students, staff, families, and the community.

John Adams High School, according to Dr. Hawthorne, is the “flagship building in the district,” and people pay attention to what happens there. This has driven him to develop relationships with parents and community members. Parents and community members have been highly involved throughout his tenure. Parent participation is high, Dr. Hawthorne explains, because “people move to this community to send their kids to the school, and they pay a pretty high tax rate in order to do it.” Sometimes, because of their deep involvement in the school, he has to explain to parents the difference between what is right for their child, and what is right for all students of John Adams High School. To do so, Dr. Hawthorne maintains a “10,000-foot view” of topics and situations.

Part of maintaining this view, Dr. Hawthorne says, is a continual focus on “trying to provide our kids the best opportunity to be successful 24-year old adults.” This focus is part of the message he shares with students, staff, parents, and the community. Along with their AP and dual enrollment courses and ACT prep opportunities, John Adams High School has developed and implemented a 21st Century Skills curriculum designed to teach students to think critically, communicate and collaborate with others, and develop and use media literacy. Communicating the availability and effect of these opportunities with parents and the community is an important part of his responsibilities.

Dr. Hawthorne sends a monthly newsletter to parents and the community, and communicates via their student information system’s messaging tool with parents “two to three times a month.” He has monthly staff meetings and emails staff announcements weekly. He communicates with students through P.A. announcements as needed and through regular Principal’s Advisory Committee meetings, which is composed of elected representatives from student organizations. Dr. Hawthorne says an assistant principal

manages the high school's Twitter account sharing celebrations of student and team achievements, general information, upcoming events, and schedule changes.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

The school improvement process at John Adams High School is driven by the district's strategic planning process. Strategic planning, along with feedback from the school accreditation process, provides school improvement direction, but specific improvement efforts are selected by the staff. The school improvement team meets multiple times each year to generate a conversation with the staff. The staff provides input on improvement needs, and the school improvement team provides improvement strategies. Then, teachers are trained on those strategies through staff development, and the cycle continues.

School improvement goals are set every three years at John Adams High School. Staff choose three improvement goals, which may include goals from the previous cycle, from a menu of ten goals Dr. Hawthorne believes would be beneficial to the school and align with the district's strategic planning goals. The current school improvement goals, which include the building's mission, are, according to Dr. Hawthorne, to create "two-and four-year college graduates with minimal debt, provide social and emotional support for our students, and implementation of 21st Century skills into our curriculum."

Being able to "measure where we're at and where we're going" is important to Dr. Hawthorne. Tracking data for most of their goals is "pretty simple," he says. "I can measure ACT [scores]... college graduation rate... [and] high school graduation rate.... by pulling data." To measure the implementation of 21st Century skills into the curriculum, teachers at John Adams High School, under Dr. Hawthorne's direction,

audited their courses, units, and summative assessments to indicate which of the 21st Century skills were being taught and assessed in each unit. With this complete, teachers at John Adams High School can determine which academic concepts students struggle with and which 21st Century Skills they need to improve upon. “Lots of schools say [they are] implementing 21st Century skills.... But,” Dr. Hawthorne states, “I think we have a way to measure it.”

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Dr. Hawthorne has a number of curriculum and instruction responsibilities at John Adams High School. The school mirrors the state’s seven-year standards adoption cycle, and he works with the departments and curriculum director to implement the changes made by the state. Performing a majority of the building’s teacher evaluations, Dr. Hawthorne works with staff members to develop and monitor the progress of student learning objectives focused on curriculum implementation and student achievement. He oversees the instructional budget, determines budgetary allocations, approves departmental spending, and provides building-level approval for new curriculum or courses as part of the curriculum and personnel proposal process.

Dr. Hawthorne’s primary goal for curriculum and instruction is to prepare students to go to and be successful in college. Because he believes more than 90% of John Adams High School students will graduate whether he is the principal or not, high school graduation is not Dr. Hawthorne’s focus. College graduation rate is his “number one metric.” The school’s curriculum is designed to prepare students to achieve this goal. Curriculum is developed backwards, by reviewing state standards and mapping the curriculum. From these curriculum maps, units, assessments, lessons, and lesson plans

are created. Teachers who teach different sections of the same course must use the same curriculum map.

Instructional and curricular effectiveness are determined by evaluating student achievement on the ACT and other standardized assessments. He communicates with teachers to gather their input in this evaluation process and to review the course grade distribution reports. After studying the ACT and its questions, and to improve ACT scores, Dr. Hawthorne led his teachers in developing new questions on local assessments that more accurately mimic the ACT, better preparing students for the ACT and college. To help Dr. Hawthorne measure student success in college, John Adams High School has tracked every student who has graduated since 2007 to see how many went to college and how many graduate college in four or five years.

Dr. Hawthorne uses a number of metrics to assess John Adams High School's non-curricular programs. Among them are student interest and participation levels, program operating costs, program benefits and teacher, coach, and sponsor input.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Dr. Hawthorne expects his staff to be professional, which includes: "show up on time... dress appropriately... update their gradebook every Friday... know every kid's name in their class... [and] build relationships with those kids." Dr. Hawthorne meets with his staff at the beginning of the year to explain these expectations, and has monthly staff meetings to review the past month and discuss "what needs to happen in the next 30 days."

Recruiting and selecting high-quality professionals to work at John Adams High School is a straight-forward process. Beginning with their typically large number of

applicants, Dr. Hawthorne and the superintendent individually narrow the pool down to four or five applicants they would like to interview. Then, together, they determine the four or five applicants to interview for the position. The superintendent interviews the candidates by himself, and Dr. Hawthorne interviews candidates with an assistant principal, a counselor and a staff member. At the conclusion of the interview, he provides candidates a tour of the school. Once the interviews and tours are concluded, the interviewers determine who they want to hire.

New teachers are assigned a mentor to work with over the course of their first year. Before the beginning of the year, new staff members receive two days of training to help them understand the culture of the school. Throughout the year, Dr. Hawthorne says new teachers have “homework assignments,” and the administration meets with them four times to discuss upcoming events and questions they may have.

All staff members have access to school in-service opportunities throughout the year. They may also attend local conferences. If a conference is not local, Dr. Hawthorne and the teacher will discuss the rationale for attending the conference, and try to determine if there is a similar local conference.

Dr. Hawthorne determines whole-staff professional development by taking “the pulse” of his staff to determine what they need for training. Previous professional development topics include: how to look at data sheets, how to write curriculum maps, and how to effectively run PLC meetings. John Adams High School uses On To College ACT prep services and he contracts their team to train his staff to use their tools. Dr. Hawthorne has provided other specific training opportunities for working with autistic

children and for implementing the behavior intervention process. Sometimes, he says, state directives determine staff training needs, and he provides those as well.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

In the years Dr. Hawthorne has been at John Adams High School, he says the school's population has doubled. Maintaining effective operations and systems "in a school that's growing [so] fast," is difficult because "the systems I had in place five years ago may not work today," Dr. Hawthorne says. Effectiveness, he believes, is determined through the evaluation of budget and performance data, student achievement, and efficiency. He meets periodically with his staff to monitor progress toward achieving goals and then make changes based on their data.

As the school's enrollment has increased, so has spending. Because the superintendent uses a formula to allocate funds to each school based on the number of students in the building, the school's budget has increased as well. Dr. Hawthorne tracks his expenses from year to year and adjusts his spending by looking at "what I've done in the past," leading to "an idea of what money needs to be spent in different places." Budgets, he says, are mostly for the supplies students and staff need, and to "get staff the equipment... [and] training they need to be effective teachers." Additionally, the building budget is used to provide administrative professional development and training and to fund building maintenance.

Dr. Hawthorne draws on his experience as a former buildings and grounds coordinator to manage the site, facilities, and services offered at John Adams High School. Dr. Hawthorne's focus is on the operation and aesthetics of the building. If things do not look nice, he says, "we... either get them fixed or... replaced." He does routine

maintenance checks around the building to ensure everything is “working correctly,” and if something is not working properly, he knows “how to get the right person in place to fix it.”

The rules, policies, practices, and procedures Dr. Hawthorne and his team have in place are designed to enhance the safety, security, and social-emotional well-being of their students and to provide students with the best opportunities possible. As the year progresses, student behavior issues are tracked. At the end of the year, Dr. Hawthorne says rules are evaluated to see if they “move the needle” when it comes to impacting behavior. If they don’t, the administrative team proposes changes, which are then presented to the Board of Education. If the changes are approved, they are implemented for the next school year.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Dr. Hawthorne describes the culture of the school as “inclusive” and caring. He says students are “proud of going to school here and they’re proud of their classmates.” Students actively support one another at athletic and activities events. Games and activities are well attended by parents and the community, as well. “It’s always kind of been that way,” Dr. Hawthorne says.

To celebrate student achievement and success, John Adams High School holds four pep rallies each year. At these pep rallies, the upcoming season’s participants are introduced, as are any students who have earned state recognition during the past season. Dr. Hawthorne shares good news and other information at two assemblies each year, over the P.A. system, and through his Principal’s Advisory Committee. This support and celebration helps build strong relationships in the school.

When asked about the single most important part of the culture and climate at his school, Dr. Hawthorne replies, “It’s hard to say one.” Relationships, especially those between teachers and students, he says, are “really strong” at John Adams High School. “Parental support is fantastic,” and “our community shows up,” to events, he says. Parents are big supporters, both personally and financially. “They want to put their money where their mouth is,” he continues, and will “pay to make sure we have good things here.”

Dr. Hawthorne uses a variety of surveys to measure the climate and culture of the school. Dr. Hawthorne’s most used climate and culture assessment tool, though, is conversations with the students. He wants students to have a good high school experience, and tells them regularly, “If you’re not having a good experience, come talk to me. I’ll try to help you have a better experience than you are.”

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

While he is responsible for plant management, human resources, and communications, Dr. Hawthorne believes his role as principal begins with being an instructional leader and coach, which he feels he does “pretty well.” He tells teachers who are struggling, “We’re gonna find out what you’re struggling with and... we’re going to give you plans to get better and measure... to see if you are” improving.

Ethical practice, according to Dr. Hawthorne, is grounded in being well-versed in state statutes and school law. He believes in “being honest with staff and kids and parents... consistently implementing programs with equity... [and] consistently administering positive and negative reinforcement.” He models ethical practice through

his day-to-day actions by apologizing when he makes mistakes and by following established local, state, and national rules, policies, and laws.

Dr. Hawthorne balances ethical practice and local, state, and national policies by staying up-to-date with school law precedent and through conversations. He has conversations with his assistant principals, the superintendent, board members, and stakeholders to understand their concerns, gain support and build consensus for changes or large initiatives. In addition to law precedent and input from school officials and stakeholders, Dr. Hawthorne considers his own personal beliefs regarding how “a school building... should be led.”

Parents, and their expectations for their kids, are the biggest external influence he faces at the school, according to Dr. Hawthorne. He says parents get frustrated because they do not feel their kids are getting what “they deserve,” leading to parents who “want our coaches removed.” To counteract this, the school’s Athletic Director attends and evaluates coaches and sponsors at practice and competition, and administrators supervise every home activity and all conference, district, and state activities on the road. Dr. Hawthorne believes that by attending these events, they are able to say to parents, “We know what’s going on.”

Themes and Summary

In the interview with Dr. Hawthorne, two thematic forces emerged: his building’s mission, and a straightforward pragmatism. Dr. Hawthorne was driven to “create two- and four-year college graduates with as little college debt as possible.” This mission influenced his vision for learning and the relationships he developed with his teachers, his students, and their parents, and it was one of the school’s three school improvement

goals. It also served as the basis for curriculum development and influenced professional development and the allocation of human resources.

Beyond his use of the building's mission statement, Dr. Hawthorne's approaches to staff leadership, systems management, culture for learning, and professional ethics were straightforward and pragmatic. He expected his staff to be professional and to work with students to help them be successful. He developed systems to be efficient and effective. Dr. Hawthorne described the culture as "inclusive," and his goal was to ensure students have "a good experience in high school." Dr. Hawthorne believed consistency, trust, and honesty are important factors in the professional ethics and practices of a principal. He also relied on his "own personal beliefs" to help him lead, manage, and improve John Adams High School.

When asked about the district mission, Dr. Hawthorne knew it immediately, but described it as "the same as every single school district mission in the United States." For this reason, he and his school adopted the building mission "to create two- and four-year college graduates with as little debt as possible." He believed his teachers identify with the building's mission more closely than with the district's mission.

The district mission was posted in the main commons area and was stated in the student handbook, in the certified staff evaluation handbook, and on the district letterhead. More prominently posted in the commons area was the building mission and evidence of progress toward achieving that mission. Dr. Hawthorne had systems in place to track and display this data, and he had frequent conversations with students, parents, and teachers about achieving it. The building mission was also included in the student handbook.

Dr. Hawthorne presented a challenging case when determining the utilization of the district's mission statement. On the one hand, he was personally driven by the building's mission statement and built a system to achieve that mission. He had conversations with students about college choice and the rationale behind that choice. He and his staff used the building mission as "a beacon" to guide and inform decisions on budget, staffing, curriculum and instruction. Using the mission to help drive decision-making "helps build a case for why we want to make changes," Dr. Hawthorne said. On the other hand, when Dr. Hawthorne dismissed the district's mission, it became a mere statement, something foreign and not a part of who they are or what they do. It was not part of his decision-making processes, nor was it a motivational factor for him. In his day-to-day work, Dr. Hawthorne was driven by a mission, and led a mission-driven school. It was just not the district's mission.

Case Study #4 - Mrs. Julie Maddox, Harry Truman Elementary School

Mrs. Julie Maddox is the elementary principal at Harry Truman Elementary School. Mrs. Maddox views the principal position as a "multifaceted" role, where she serves as the "building leader" and "instructional coach" who builds the "culture in the school" and focuses on "student learning."

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mrs. Maddox's vision for teaching and learning is based on student success. This vision is built on two complementary parts: "to find ways for all students to be successful and learn," and "to empower teachers to individualize instruction" to meet the needs of all students. She developed this vision over the course of her career as a teacher, integration specialist, board member, and principal. Earning her administrative degree

prompted Mrs. Maddox to consider “what... education [is] all about and what the role of the principal is.”

Mrs. Maddox’s personal goal for Harry Truman Elementary School is “to make every student successful.” This goal aligns with the administrative team’s vision to “reach students and get... students to learn.” This vision is shared with staff through discussion at in-service, staff meetings, and individual teacher meetings. Throughout these discussions, Mrs. Maddox asks, “What can we do to make every student successful?” Then, she and her staff begin the work to answer that question.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Mrs. Maddox describes her relationships with the community, families, staff, and students as “strong” and “good.” These relationships have evolved over her many years in the community, but Mrs. Maddox believes relationships with community members have not changed significantly since becoming a principal because “a lot of the parents of kids” in the elementary school are “former students of mine.” These parents, she continues, “already know me... and [feel] comfortable coming to me with problems or issues.”

While she considers her relationships with parents and community members good and their support strong, Mrs. Maddox believes community and parental participation is an area “we could definitely improve upon.” She believes Harry Truman Elementary School has “a strong parent organization.” Parents and community members come to the building throughout the year for different activities, like concerts, sporting events, and “those kinds of things,” but Mrs. Maddox would like to host more “literacy” and academic events to bring parents into the school more often.

Though Mrs. Maddox’s message to staff, students, families, and community members changes as needed, her modes of communication are fairly consistent. She uses social media for mass communication by sharing messages through Facebook and Twitter. If Mrs. Maddox needs to communicate directly with parents, she sends emails. A weekly bulletin is sent to parents notifying them of activities and events at the elementary school. Social media, however, is their most common means of communication.

Before Mrs. Maddox and the high school principal arrived at Harry Truman Public Schools, the school’s social media presence was lacking. The school “didn’t even have a Facebook page,” recalls Mrs. Maddox. They “encourage” teachers to “take a picture, write a little something... and put it” on social media when they are “doing something neat in the classroom.” Social media, Mrs. Maddox feels, is a good tool to “show the community what’s happening in our classrooms as well as... extra-curricular activities,” and to generate positive conversation in the community about student success.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Mrs. Maddox describes the school improvement process as a “continuous... five-year cycle.” The process begins with the data team’s collection and examination of data to identify improvement areas. Led by Mrs. Maddox and the high school principal, the school improvement team reviews the data team’s suggestions to determine improvement goals for the cycle. Together with the whole staff, the school improvement team proposes and selects strategies to meet the school improvement goals. While the school improvement process was “not being done very well” when she and the high school principal arrived, Mrs. Maddox says school improvement is now “part of our culture.”

School improvement goals and actions are established through data collection and study. Students complete standardized assessments twice each year, which provides student growth data for the year and across years. Mrs. Maddox says goals are established to overcome areas “where we’re at a deficit,” and strategies are suggested by teachers and staff members to overcome these deficit areas. Their current goal is for “all students [to] improve in reading and... math.” Throughout the cycle, they will choose strategies, and after implementing them, they “look at the data and see where we’re at.” Their goal, according to Mrs. Maddox, is “to be able to show growth.”

To keep the school improvement process moving forward, Mrs. Maddox and the high school principal have “been very deliberate about meeting with the school improvement team” to discuss “where we’re at.... what we’re doing.... [and] what we need.” This focus keeps the school improvement process “in everybody’s mind,” Mrs. Maddox says. Before ending each school improvement team meeting, the team establishes the date and time for their next meeting time and what needs to be done before the next meeting. Once the school improvement team has met, the whole staff is updated on progress and next steps.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

As principal, Mrs. Maddox serves as Harry Truman Elementary School’s curriculum director. When selecting a new curriculum, she considers a number of factors. Mrs. Maddox believes any new curriculum should be “research-based” and aligned with the Nebraska State Standards. She contacts other principals to gauge the effectiveness of their curriculum, and she consults with her teachers to identify their preferences. Cost,

too, is a factor in the curriculum selection process. “Sometimes,” she says, “we end up choosing a curriculum that’s a little bit different than we... wanted because of money.”

Mrs. Maddox ensures the curriculum is aligned with school goals through walk-throughs and lesson-plan study. She studies teacher’s lesson plans to make “sure they’re following the standards” and completes walk-throughs to “make sure that... what they have in their lesson plans is what they’re actually teaching in their classroom.”

Instructional and curricular effectiveness is directly tied to the alignment of the curriculum with the goals of the school. In addition to performing walk-throughs and examining lesson plans, Mrs. Maddox studies assessment data to evaluate student learning and growth. The school’s primary data sources to determine student growth are standardized assessments.

Evaluating the non-curricular programs and opportunities offered at Harry Truman Elementary School is “kind of difficult” for Mrs. Maddox. The school has a “Run/Walk Club” in the morning before school, where students run or walk laps on the track or in the gym. Student punch cards show how many miles they have walked or run, and individual and group progress is posted on the wall. After school, students are able to get help with homework during “Power Hour.” She has tried to look at data in the past “to see if... they’re showing growth. But it’s really difficult to know if that’s helping or not.”

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mrs. Maddox expects her staff to be professional, which includes coming to work every day, following the school rules, dressing appropriately, teaching to the district and state standards, and using class time wisely. The overall theme for the school is “Choose

Kindness,” and Mrs. Maddox expects teachers to “be nice to everyone... [and] each other.” These expectations are shared in meetings at the beginning of each school year and following formal and walk-through observations. Mrs. Maddox says the staff makes her “job pretty easy.... They’re very professional, [and] they do what they’re supposed to do.”

Recruiting and retaining high-quality staff members, Mrs. Maddox believes, is about “vetting each applicant.” The process begins by advertising openings on the Teach in Nebraska website and on their own school website. As applications arrive, administrators begin the vetting process. They “look through their social media... call their references... or call people that they haven’t listed as references that maybe they’ve been under,” she says. At the conclusion of the vetting process, they select their interview candidates. Mrs. Maddox and the high school principal interview candidates together, and once candidates have completed their interview, they meet with the superintendent to discuss “salary and... those kinds of things.” Once the interviews are complete, Mrs. Maddox says, hiring is “basically my decision.”

To help develop and retain high quality staff members, Mrs. Maddox focuses on school culture. “Culture is huge,” she says. After she hires new teachers, Mrs. Maddox works to be “in classrooms” helping them “be successful.” Mrs. Maddox believes new teachers tend to have “classroom management issues” and she tries “to give them strategies to make things a bit easier for them.” By helping new teachers have a better experience and building a good culture, Mrs. Maddox retains good teachers because “if you have a good culture, people don’t want to leave.”

The administrative team plans and delivers professional development through a collaborative effort. Mrs. Maddox, the high school principal, and the superintendent determine staff needs prior to in-services and develop the training to help meet those needs. If the administrative team feels they are not the best option to provide the necessary staff training, they will “call upon [the] ESU... professional development team to help.”

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mrs. Maddox’s approach to systems management is based on problem solving. She describes this approach as improving “things that... need to be improved on.” To solve problems beyond her scope of influence, Mrs. Maddox brings issues to the weekly administrative team meetings, where they openly discuss issues and suggest changes.

While Mrs. Maddox has control over human resources and hiring, she does not have control over her financial resources. “I don’t have a budget,” she says. To make decisions involving the budget and approving expenses, “I have to go talk to [the superintendent].” She continues, “If I had a budget that I could run... I could make those decisions easily,” by considering how the expenditure is “going to help kids” and “improve their learning.”

Mrs. Maddox is “always looking” for ways to improve the site, facility, services, and equipment. “I look for... big problems,” she says. “Our biggest problem right now,” she continues, is “we need to expand.” To identify day-to-day maintenance issues, Mrs. Maddox walks through the building and makes “a list of things that... need fixed or improved.” Teachers are also able to submit maintenance requests to fix problems in their rooms.

Mrs. Maddox's problem-solving approach to management extends into the expectations, rules, policies, and procedures of the school. To review them, she asks, "How are things running now?" and "Is there a problem we need to fix?" For Mrs. Maddox, "It's... a matter of looking and watching and seeing and... finding things that need to be improved upon." If nothing needs to be fixed or improved upon, Mrs. Maddox does not make changes.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mrs. Maddox describes the culture at Harry Truman Elementary School as "very positive." She sees teachers standing in the hall, greeting students as they enter the classrooms. In the hallways and classrooms, she says, "You can tell the... teachers and students have strong bonds." It was not always this way. When she first became principal, the culture was not very good. Teachers stayed in their classrooms and avoided one another. Mrs. Maddox and the high school principal "made a concerted effort to bring the whole staff together." Mrs. Maddox has worked especially hard to remove the "disconnect" between the special education teachers and classroom teachers, because the students are "our... kids." Now, through her efforts to bring them together, "they're doing a lot better job of working together," she says, "and that's really helped [the] culture, too."

Celebrations at Harry Truman Elementary School are focused on specific events. Achievement scores are one area students and staff celebrate. According to Mrs. Maddox, students were encouraged to "give the[ir] best effort" during last year's state testing. When they did, their effort was celebrated with the students and with teachers.

Mrs. Maddox believes the most important component of the school culture is the continual decision to “choose kindness.” This “overarching theme” for the school inspires the actions of staff and students alike, she says, because “everybody can show kindness to everyone.” The consequences of these decisions are on display daily, she says, when “teachers [are] being kind to each other, teachers [are] being kind to students, [and] students [are] being kind to each other.”

While Mrs. Maddox doesn’t formally evaluate the climate and culture of the school, she assesses it by what she sees, hears, and feels in “classrooms and in the halls.” When she speaks to visitors and substitute teachers, they speak with her about the culture of the building in a positive way. These conversations reinforce her view that Harry Truman Elementary School has a “positive” culture.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mrs. Maddox believes her role as principal is to be the instructional and cultural leader of the school. She believes a principal has to “be a good role model” and “encourage” teachers and students to meet and follow the rules, expectations, policies, and procedures of the school. As a role model and ethical leader, it is important to Mrs. Maddox to consider “how you live your life,” both “inside... [and] outside the school.”

To align her vision of ethical practice and the policies principals are challenged to implement, she focuses on her responsibilities as an ethical leader. “If... we are supposed to implement [something], then,” Mrs. Maddox says, “even if I feel against it, or don’t feel like it’s right, I do it.” She continues, “I expect teachers to do it as well,” even if they “might not believe in it.” Mrs. Maddox recognizes this can have a negative impact on her

building, because these policies “might seem unnecessary.” Through it all, though, Mrs. Maddox believes “it’s important to keep [a] positive attitude about things.”

Mrs. Maddox identifies teachers as the most influential force on her ability to achieve her vision for the school because of their ability to support or derail initiatives. “In order for… something to work,” she says, “it can’t just be my vision.... It has to be a shared vision.” Without the teachers, and their buy-in, Mrs. Maddox does not believe she will be able to achieve her vision for the school.

Themes and Summary

Three themes emerged from the interview with Mrs. Maddox: student success, problem-solving, and relationships. Mrs. Maddox’s vision for teaching and learning at Harry Truman Elementary School was to find ways for students to learn and be successful and to empower teachers to individualize instruction to help meet the needs of their students. Mrs. Maddox then worked to solve the problems standing in the way of achieving her vision. School improvement, curriculum, rules and expectations, and her approach to managing the site, facilities, and resources were based on solving problems.

Mrs. Maddox’s other major focus as she led and managed her school was staff and student relationships. This began with the school’s theme to “Choose Kindness,” and continued through her belief that “everybody can show kindness to everyone.” Early in her tenure as principal, Mrs. Maddox identified the poor relationships in her building and together with the high school principal, worked to improve those relationships.

When asked the mission of the school, Mrs. Maddox could not recall the mission, saying, “I should know our school’s mission.” Mrs. Maddox was part of the mission statement writing process, but as she thought about the mission, she said, “I mean, our

mission is for every student to succeed.” While this was not the school’s mission, it was clearly her mission within the school. When asked how she knew if the school is achieving its mission, Mrs. Maddox admitted that “it’s hard to know.”

The school’s mission statement was posted in the main lobby of the building and elsewhere in the building, but it was not posted in classrooms. The mission was stated in the student handbook and their old mission statement was used as part of the previous school improvement presentation. The current mission statement was developed as part of the current school improvement process.

Mrs. Maddox did not specifically discuss the district’s mission statement during the course of the interview. It is possible she believed finding ways for students to learn and be successful is empowerment, but she did not identify it as so. She addressed student growth, relationship building, choosing kindness, and teacher empowerment as decision-making factors she uses as principal. While these are valid and respectable considerations, they did not explicitly address the mission statement.

Case Study #5 - Mr. William Brown, Harry Truman High School

Mr. William Brown, the Harry Truman High School principal, believes the principal’s primary responsibility is to “support the teachers so... the teachers can support the students.”

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Brown’s vision for teaching and learning is “to create kids that will be successful in life after school.” He developed this philosophy as a teacher, and it continues to evolve while he serves as principal. Mr. Brown believes, “You can have all

the teaching you want. You're not going to have any learning unless there's a two-way street." This "two-way street" is built on relationships.

Mr. Brown's goal is to build the relationships necessary for students to learn and be successful. He believes "you have to take care of your teachers" so they can "form relationships with students." According to Mr. Brown, students who "don't have food... [or] structure" in their lives will not be "where they need to be academically." At a small school, Mr. Brown believes he has the opportunity "to create kids who will be successful in life after school" because he, his staff, and his students are able to "know" one another and build the necessary relationships.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Mr. Brown describes his relationship with the school's staff, students, families, and community members as "excellent." Mr. Brown believes relationship-building is his area of strength. "Visibility, open mindedness" and treating people with "dignity" and "respect" are important factors to Mr. Brown when building relationships. When first building relationships, Mr. Brown believes people want to see "if you have integrity" and will "follow through." He continues, "As long as you stick to your... core values, your morals... you're fine."

Family and community participation at Harry Truman High School is, according to Mr. Brown, "great.... They come to everything." Events, like games, are sometimes Mr. Brown's best opportunities to talk with parents about their students' grades. Parent-teacher conferences have an attendance rate of 72%. This high level of parental participation, Mr. Brown believes, "comes back" to the school's mission to "engage and

empower students.” Students enjoy coming to school, according to Mr. Brown, which increases parent participation and involvement.

Mr. Brown’s communications are centered around his belief that “your perception’s your reality,” and he works to understand each stakeholder’s reality. He focuses on being “empathetic” and understanding the stakeholder’s “plight.” Mr. Brown communicates with staff, students, parents, and the community through his blog, articles in the newspaper, telephone calls, and emails. Together, the administrative team shares a “common message” in “the same voice” to avoid confusion among staff, students, parents, or community members. The most common communication tool used by the school’s administrative team is social media.

Mr. Brown uses social media “a lot” to communicate with his stakeholders. With one app, he can post messages on Facebook, Twitter, and to their website. Their “common message” does not necessarily change on social media, but “social media... forces you to get ahead of the story,” he says, and “frame it the way we want to.”

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Mr. Brown says the school improvement process at Harry Truman Public Schools is “getting better.” When he first arrived, two staff members did all the school improvement work, and the process was “dysfunctional.” Mr. Brown does not blame them for the dysfunction, though, because, he says, “They were doing what they knew.” Since then, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal, along with their steering team, have led the school improvement process. The steering team is composed of two math teachers, a social studies teacher, three elementary teachers, and a special education teacher.

The school improvement process begins with the steering team studying standardized and classroom assessment data and “brainstorm[ing]” to identify improvement goals. The current school improvement goals are “to improve reading skills” and “to improve math skills.” Once goals are identified, the steering team presents them to the staff to collect feedback. Then, the staff begins the process of researching, discussing, and selecting different methods, strategies, and interventions. The next step in the school improvement process is to implement training during the school year and in the summer and to encourage teachers to attend additional professional development.

Mr. Brown works to keep school improvement efforts moving forward by being “deliberate” with the process which keeps it at the front “of everybody’s thoughts.” In the years he has been at Harry Truman High School, their school improvement process has changed significantly. “School improvement is not shuffling a bunch of paper like it was ten years ago,” he says. Today, the focus is on looking at data and getting better. “We’re not where we need to be,” Mr. Brown admits, but “we’re getting there.”

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

As a small school principal, being the high school’s curriculum director is one of Mr. Brown’s responsibilities. When he first arrived at Harry Truman High School, curriculum management and development was run by the guidance counselor. After discussing this situation, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal decided they would take control of the curriculum development and adoption processes, and they crafted a plan to coordinate it with the Nebraska State Standards adoption cycle.

Mr. Brown evaluates the school’s curricular and instructional effectiveness through walk-through and formal observations, lesson-plan study, and conversations with

his teachers. Observations focus on five instructional areas from the Marzano instructional framework. Through this focus, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal utilize a common language in their conversations with teachers. Mr. Brown discusses different instructional strategies used by teachers and what strategies have “worked” in their classrooms.

While Mr. Brown does not conduct the formal evaluation of non-curricular programs, he believes these programs provide three significant benefits. They develop positive community partnerships, increase student participation opportunities, and offer students a broad variety of experiences. Each of these benefits contributes to Mr. Brown’s vision of having “the best product in the state.”

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Brown expects his staff to be professional. He shares this expectation with them at the beginning of the year and throughout the year in conversations and emails. To Mr. Brown, being professional means “showing integrity” and “communicating”; being “prompt, respectful, [and] organized”; understanding “where kids come from” and that “failure leads to success”; taking “ownership” of decisions and actions; and “speaking with good purpose.” Most importantly to Mr. Brown, it means knowing and doing “what’s right.” When staff follow the mantra, “Know what’s right, do what’s right,” they may act with autonomy. He tells them, “If it’s common sense, and you think it’s the right thing to do, you don’t have to ask. Do it.”

The recruiting and hiring process at Harry Truman Public Schools begins by advertising openings on the Teach in Nebraska website and on social media. As applications arrive, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal begin reviewing

applications. Each applicant's transcript is reviewed, and if it indicates an applicant is not competent, Mr. Brown says, they are "not going to get an interview." Before calling applicants for interviews, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal call their references, and he calls "mutual friend[s] on Facebook" to determine if an applicant is "a self-starter... a good communicator... [and] flexible." Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal conduct the interviews together. After the interview, they give the candidate a tour and take them to the superintendent to discuss "the negotiated agreement... the pay scale, extra dut[ies], extra contracted days, and all of that." To make a selection, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal discuss the candidates' "strengths and weaknesses," but the decision comes down to "capacity." To hire a candidate, Mr. Brown believes they must "have the capacity to learn" and "to push kids" to learn.

Once hired, Mr. Brown helps new teachers "fit in" by helping them find their "niche" within the staff. He serves as the new teacher's mentor to begin building a relationship with them. Mr. Brown believes staff turnover is beyond his control, because "sometimes... the person is going to leave."

All teachers at Harry Truman Public School participate in the yearly professional development and in-service plan developed by Mr. Brown, the elementary school principal, the steering team, and ESU consultants. This plan is built around the Nebraska School Accountability System, AQuESTT (Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow), and its tenets and indicators. To build the plan, the steering team and ESU members discuss "what they do well... what they need to improve upon," what they "covered the year before," and what they "want to do" this year. When

they first arrived, Mr. Brown and the elementary school principal discovered the need to implement a new instructional framework, which became their first professional development focus. After their first year, they built the current system for planning professional development around Nebraska's AQuESTT tenets and indicators.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Brown utilizes systems-based thinking and includes stakeholder feedback in his efforts to build and develop effective systems and operations. He believes, “It all comes back to communications.” Clearly communicating expectations is an important part of Mr. Brown’s “intentional” and “deliberate” approach. At the heart of his approach is the mantra, “Know what’s right, do what’s right, do what’s best for kids.”

To allocate resources, Mr. Brown continues his “do what’s best for kids” approach. Mr. Brown allocates financial resources based on the “benefits” to students. When managing the school’s site, facilities, equipment, and services, Mr. Brown takes a five-year, systems-based approach. This approach is focused on “cost” and “if it’s best for kids.” While he does not make the final decisions for site and facility improvements, he makes recommendations based on what is “good for kids.” When the superintendent makes his decisions, Mr. Brown says, if it is “good for kids.... it usually gets approved.” Mr. Brown has greater autonomy over his allocation of human resources and he is able to make schedule changes and shuffle staff members to meet the school’s needs and goals.

As he reviews and considers the school’s rules, expectations, policies, and procedures, Mr. Brown searches for “loopholes that parents are going to find.” As he rewrites those rules and policies to close the loopholes, he prefers to keep them “broad” to allow for principal “discretion.” Throughout this process, Mr. Brown involves students

and staff and focuses on maintaining the “overall learning environment.” When sharing staff and student expectations, he tries to “keep it simple,” and does not share more than two or three expectations at a time. His general expectations are based on the school mission to “engage and empower students every day,” because “those are three things I can remember: everyday, engage, and empower.” Mr. Brown believes “everything can center on those things.”

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

According to Mr. Brown, the culture at Harry Truman High School is “fantastic.” It is built on a foundation of decision making, listening, and mindfulness. “Including everybody,” and “everybody’s voice,” is an important part of the culture, and is a leadership decision Mr. Brown makes. Because of this leadership choice, Mr. Brown believes “people take my lead.”

Celebrations and awards at Harry Truman High School are framed around students and their success, while being mindful of and recognizing the importance of the staff’s role in student success. Mr. Brown chooses not to “go over the top with awards,” because he wants to “keep the kids hungry.” Student learning and success, he says, require a “team approach.” Even though they have a team supporting them, Mr. Brown wants students to understand they are the “owners” of their success.

The most important components of the school culture, according to Mr. Brown, are “people, thoughts, and… the environment.” If people are unhappy, or if their needs aren’t met, they are not able to teach or learn. Mr. Brown believes the school is responsible for helping meet “teachers’ and students’ basic needs,” so they can “function the way they function.”

Mr. Brown measures the culture and climate of the school through conversations and surveys. He relies on his relationships and conversations with teachers, parents, and students to understand their concerns. Parents complete surveys at parent-teacher conferences. Teachers and students complete a climate survey provided by the state department. Additionally, Mr. Brown asks students to complete a short survey to monitor the student body's "pulse."

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Brown sees himself as a "leader" and "connector" of people. Connecting people, he says, means "building relationships" with students and staff. Mr. Brown offers help to students and staff, believing "if somebody says they can help you... let them help you." As an ethical leader, he believes in leading with "integrity," in "knowing what's right, doing what's right," and in telling "the truth all the time." This, Mr. Brown says, builds relationships and trust.

To Mr. Brown, aligning ethical practice and the role of principal means knowing what he is "willing to bend on and what I am not willing to bend on." While he wants to meet expectations, he is "not willing" to do whatever it takes to meet expectations. To fully embrace new policies, policy changes, or mandates made by the state department, Mr. Brown wants "to know the why" behind them. Otherwise, he adds, new policies seem like "unfunded mandate[s] and more work." If the NDE would share "the why" behind new policies, he believes more people would willingly work to meet the imposed expectations.

The most influential forces acting upon Mr. Brown's ability to achieve his vision for the school are "optics" and "money," which are often closely tied together.

“Stakeholders,” he says, “are always looking at what you’re spending.” Stakeholder views of spending influence their perception of the school and, Mr. Brown says, “your perception’s your reality.” To further influence perception, he has “truthful” conversations with stakeholders, and the administrative team finds “creative” ways to generate funds, including building windmills and applying for grants and additional funding.

Themes and Summary

Three primary themes emerged during Mr. Brown’s interview: student success, relationships, and knowing and doing what is right or best. These themes presented themselves as core beliefs informing Mr. Brown’s approach to leading, managing, and improving Harry Truman High School. He wanted “to create kids who will be successful in life after school,” to build the necessary relationships for this to happen, and to encourage everyone in the system to “know what’s right, [and] do what’s right.” These three premises informed most of Mr. Brown’s decisions and actions.

Two other factors weighed heavily in Mr. Brown’s decision making processes: AQuESTT and the school mission statement. The school improvement and professional development processes were heavily influenced by the AQuESTT tenets and indicators, because Mr. Brown utilized the accountability tool’s guidance and rubric to build a successful school. The school mission statement, developed as part of the school improvement process, factored into Mr. Brown’s relationships and his development of rules, expectations, policies and procedures for students and staff.

When asked, Mr. Brown knew the mission immediately, saying, “I always try and memorize the mission.” Mr. Brown was not sure that achieving the mission is

“quantifiable.” He asserted, though, that he can have conversations with the staff to determine if they are “doing what’s best” for students.

The current school mission statement was posted in the school’s main lobby and in classrooms. Mr. Brown’s computer displayed the mission statement, and it was posted in his office as part of planning documents. The mission was stated in the student handbook, and the previous mission statement was used as part of the last school improvement presentation.

As part of the team who crafted the mission statement, Mr. Brown was aware of it and used the mission as a discussion point for different elements of his role. Mr. Brown said, “I think our school is beginning to know their why,” which is an important step in utilizing the mission, but, he said, it is not yet “ingrained” as part of the culture or part of “the fabric of the school.”

Case Study #6 - Mr. Ryan Gordon, James Monroe Public School

Mr. Gordon serves as the Kindergarten through grade 12 principal at James Monroe Public School. As an instructional leader, he believes the principal is “not an expert in any one subject area.” The principal, he says, helps teachers “with their instructional strategies to improve the educational quality for all students.”

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Gordon’s vision for teaching and learning is to “energize” students by developing learning “partnerships” with them. This partnership, he believes, helps students “buy-in” to what the teacher is trying to teach. Mr. Gordon developed this vision as a classroom teacher, where he learned the best way to develop a partnership with students was to develop positive relationships with them. He did this, in part, by having

multiple teaching strategies ready at all times, because students learn differently. Being able to teach students the way they learn, Mr. Gordon believes, helps energize students and helps them grow.

Mr. Gordon's personal goals for his students and his school focus on student effort and growth. He communicates this goal with students because, "if you [tell] them... they'll try and do it for you." When this doesn't work, or when students fail to see the rationale behind taking a required class, Mr. Gordon explains they "have to do it," because, "it's part of policy." He continues, "In life, there are a lot of things we don't want to do.... It's not that you want to. It's that you have to." In these situations, Mr. Gordon relies on the relationships he has built with his students and encourages them to engage in their learning.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Mr. Gordon describes his relationships with staff, students, and community members as professional. "I'm always nice," he says, but "I don't have... personal relationships with a lot of people." He believes his role as principal prohibits developing too many personal relationships because "of the decisions you have to make."

Families and the community support the school, but Mr. Gordon feels "we need to work on" family participation. The challenge facing the school, he says, is the size of the district. The James Monroe Public School District is a small rural district that covers large geographic area. He says people attend athletics and activities, but they do not attend academic events like reading nights nor participate on committees. "I wish we had better family representation" on committees, Mr. Gordon says. "We try... [but] it's the same people always" participating. Because of the distance they may have to travel to

participate on committees, Mr. Gordon says some parents “want to be a part of it, but... they can’t justify coming to a meeting.”

Mr. Gordon’s communications focus on celebrating student and school accomplishments and showing the school in a “positive light.” His communications are positive “because you want people to celebrate what you’re doing.” Mr. Gordon uses the student information system, the newspaper, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to communicate with students, their families, and the community. The school celebrates a Scholar of the Week and provides classroom interviews for the community in the newspaper. He uses social media to congratulate individuals and organizations. He shares important information through the student information system and social media.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Mr. Gordon describes the school improvement process as “good.” In his time at James Monroe Public School, Mr. Gordon has changed who serves on the school improvement team. “When I first got here,” he says, “the same lady was the chairperson for 30 plus years.” Now, different people participate every cycle, Mr. Gordon says, so they “can be a part of it and... recognize how much work it is,” which generates “buy-in” from the rest of the staff. The school improvement team is composed of two elementary teachers, a high school teacher, the special education teacher, an ESU staff member, the superintendent, and the principal. This team meets once a month to develop the current cycle’s improvement goal and then to monitor progress toward achieving the goal. Mr. Gordon believes their goal for this cycle will be to improve reading comprehension.

The school improvement team will review standardized assessment and perceptual data to “develop an outline of a goal.” Once they have developed their outline,

the ESU team member will come to the school and review the data and outline with the whole staff. Then, collectively, the staff will write their school improvement goal. When setting goals, Mr. Gordon believes you have to look at both the data and the students.

“We don’t have a variety,” of students or student needs, Mr. Gordon says, but “you need to pay attention to your free and reduced [lunch]… [and] your SPED population.”

To keep everything moving forward, Mr. Gordon focuses on achieving their goal. He describes their process as setting goals and then developing objectives to reach those goals. When they set goals, he believes “it’s… easy [for someone] to tell us we can’t do it.” However, once they set their goal, Mr. Gordon’s focus is on determining “how we can.”

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Gordon acts as a facilitator of curriculum development by providing time and support in the process. “We get a lot of support from the ESU,” Mr. Gordon says, and he brings in other specialists during in-services to support teachers in the curriculum improvement process. This year, Mr. Gordon decided “to redo the curriculum.” Teachers are given time in class and during in-service meetings to do this work. Mr. Gordon’s goal for rewriting the curriculum is to make it “look the same” across grade levels and subjects so teachers, students, parents, and the community “understand what we’re doing, how it streams, [and] how it scaffolds on top of each other.”

Mr. Gordon believes test scores will show whether or not the curriculum aligns to school goals. They use NSCAS and MAP data to gauge the growth of their students throughout the year and over years. “As long as we’re growing,” Mr. Gordon believes they are achieving his goals for the school.

Mr. Gordon evaluates curricular and instructional effectiveness through the formal and informal evaluation process. His feedback and conversations with teachers, based on walk-throughs and observations, help teachers improve instruction. Mr. Gordon believes “the more information [teachers] have to improve their teaching, the better everybody is” and will do.

To evaluate the non-curricular programs and opportunities the school offers, Mr. Gordon starts by considering the coaches and sponsors. While he believes other schools focus “more on wins and losses,” Mr. Gordon focuses on how the students are treated. He expects coaches and sponsors to try “their best,” respect students, and treat them well. “As long as they are” doing that, Mr. Gordon says, “I don’t have a problem with them.”

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Gordon expects his staff to “be professional,” which means they will “treat kids all the same, treat them with respect, and try [their] best.” He communicates these expectations through staff meetings at the beginning of the year and through conversations based on feedback from walk-throughs.

Recruiting and hiring is a challenging process at James Monroe Public School. According to Mr. Gordon, they do not receive a large pool of applicants for open positions because of the school’s size and location. When selecting candidates to interview, he says, “I select the best candidate... we have. Sometimes, it’s... one application.” Mr. Gordon and the superintendent conduct interviews together. Once they hire a new staff member, Mr. Gordon begins training and guiding them.

Mr. Gordon sees a positive work environment as one of his main tools for retaining teachers. He provides professional development experiences by working with

the local ESU to deliver the training his staff wants and needs. Recent professional development trainings include topics related to continuous school improvement, behavior interventions, multi-tiered systems of support, and state mandated programs and initiatives. The ESU is a valuable professional development resource for James Monroe Public School. Mr. Gordon feels the ESU staff members understand state initiatives and are “skilled,” he says, “in every area we need.”

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Efficiency is Mr. Gordon’s key consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of the operations and systems he uses, saying, “I try to be as efficient as I can.” Additionally, he speaks to the teachers and if, together, they feel something is not working as well as it should, or something needs to change, he works to make the necessary changes.

Mr. Gordon’s biggest concern for the operation of his school is the availability of human resources because of their “limited supply.” Before making a personnel decision, Mr. Gordon considers the possible impact and consequences of his decision by asking himself how many applicants they will receive, what the applicant quality will be, and if they will be able to fill the position. He says there are “not a lot of teachers to get, [so] I can’t go rogue and get rid of a teacher. We need [them] to be certified for Rule 10.”

The school custodian is responsible for managing day-to-day maintenance of the school site, facilities, and equipment. Mr. Gordon, the superintendent, and the school board’s building committee perform periodic walk-arounds to determine what needs “to be fixed or tuned up.” One of the biggest factors in these walk-arounds is compliance to the law. Mr. Gordon tries to stay ahead of any changes they may be required to make.

When he reviews the rules, expectations, policies, and procedures of the school, he starts with the policy book and the handbooks. Mr. Gordon believes it is important to follow the rules as they are, because “that’s what your job is. It’s what you’re paid to do.” He also believes it is important to “use common sense” when reviewing and implementing the rules, expectations, policies, and procedures of the school.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mr. Gordon describes the school’s culture as positive. “We’re engaging,” he says, “and the kids enjoy being here.” Mr. Gordon believes there are few behavior and disciplinary issues at James Monroe Public School, because there are “good relationships with the students and teachers.” This fits with Mr. Gordon’s vision for teaching and learning and his desire to develop partnerships between students and teachers.

Achievements and student success are celebrated informally at James Monroe Public School. Mr. Gordon says they have students “stand up” and give them “a round of applause… at lunchtime to say congratulations.” When doing this, the entire junior and senior high school is involved in the celebration, but “it’s not a big… ceremony.” Instead, Mr. Gordon says, it is “kind of ‘Hey, congratulations.’”

Because they “dictate the culture of the school,” Mr. Gordon believes teachers and students are the school culture’s most important components. Mr. Gordon does not formally assess the school’s climate and culture, though he is open to it. “It would probably be good for us,” to do a climate or culture survey, he says, because they have “never taken them.”

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Gordon considers himself an instructional leader and counselor for teachers. He wants to be “a person the teachers can... talk to if they have a problem.” The principal, he says, “wears a lot of hats,” and “[does] a lot of things,” and has to do “a little bit of everything” while leading their school.

According to Mr. Gordon, the key element to ethical practice is honesty. “You have to be honest,” he says, “with them... [and] yourself.” Honesty, to Mr. Gordon, is “pretty broad,” but it includes “no cheating [or] lying” and taking “responsibility for your actions.”

Aligning this concept of ethical practice and his day-to-day work is not hard, according to Mr. Gordon. “You have [policies] to meet,” he says, and while “you may not like them... that’s what you’re paid to do.... That’s your job.” Mr. Gordon believes the challenge lies in meeting policies dictated by the state and federal governments. “Policy,” he says, “shouldn’t be the same and cookie cutter... because Lincoln and Omaha have no clue what’s going on out west.... Just like out west [has] no idea what’s going on in Lincoln and Omaha.” He believes this statewide policy making is “unfair” and that schools across the state would be better served if policy was developed regionally.

This feeling is reflected in Mr. Gordon’s view of the forces influencing his ability to lead, manage, and improve his school. “Inside the school,” Mr. Gordon says, “the teachers... influence” what he is able to do and accomplish. The forces influencing his work from outside the school are parents and policy makers, he says. The NDE does a “lot of positives,” he admits, but they “make a big deal... [about] what’s offered and

what we can do.... but with the size of the school that I'm... in right now.... It's inconceivable." These dictates from the NDE feel, to Mr. Gordon, like an attack on James Monroe Public School, to which he responds, "just because our numbers are [low] doesn't mean we don't justify a school."

Themes and Summary

Three overriding themes presented themselves through the interview with Mr. Gordon: straightforwardness, compliance, and struggle. Mr. Gordon took a straightforward approach to the role of principal. He wanted students to be "willing partners" in the educational process and to accept the system in which they are educated. He wanted teachers to feel they can come to him with issues or problems, but he did not maintain personal relationships with them. He worked to present the school in a good light, so his community, the students, and their families will develop a positive opinion of the school. He wanted his school to remain open and operational, and he made the necessary decisions to ensure it. His approach may be best summed up by his words to students who do not want to take required classes, "In life, there are a lot of things we don't want to do.... It's not that you want to. It's that you have to."

Mr. Gordon's experiences as a principal can be characterized as a struggle between what he would like to do and what he is required to do. As the principal of a small, rural school, Mr. Gordon faced a number of issues. They are a large district in square miles, but not in population, which strains the ability of families to participate, but he would like to increase this participation. They are a rural district, which limited his applicant pool, but he would like to make staff changes. He would like "to improve the educational quality for all students," which would require time for professional and

curricular development, but they are limited by the availability of the ESU and other specialists.

When Mr. Gordon was asked what the school's mission is, he recalled "committed to promoting educational opportunities," and he believed the school does provide educational opportunities. He felt their mission is, "kind of the cookie cutter one everybody has."

The mission was posted in some of the classrooms, and there was a sign waiting to be hung in the secretary's office. The mission was included in the student handbook and was stated in the digital portfolio and the presentation from their last school improvement cycle.

There were two main components to the James Monroe Public School mission statement: promoting educational opportunities and providing the skills needed to be productive students. In his time at James Monroe Public School, Mr. Gordon made program and curricular changes to better align the school's educational opportunities and the skills being developed in those courses and programs with the wants and needs of the community, but only in a limited fashion. He retroactively argued his decisions and actions help the school achieve its mission, but the mission was an afterthought, not a driving force in the decision-making process.

Mr. Gordon was driven by a number of factors as he led, managed, and improved his school. His focus on compliance, buy-in, and keeping the school open are understood. It was his job to meet and follow the rules and regulations provided by the NDE, and his expectation was that students and teachers will follow the rules and regulations they are presented. He needed them to accept and follow the rules and regulations in order to lead

the school efficiently. He managed his students, staff, and the organization as a whole based on these rules.

Case Study #7 - Ms. Emily Franklin, Thomas Jefferson Elementary School

Ms. Emily Franklin serves as the Thomas Jefferson Elementary School principal and the district's special education coordinator. She previously taught at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School and applied to become principal because she "didn't want an outsider coming in and changing the awesome things we are doing."

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Ms. Franklin's vision for teaching and learning is to "let teachers do what they do best." This vision, she says, was built during her time in the classroom and influenced by administrators who trusted her. Ms. Franklin's vision for Thomas Jefferson Elementary School is one of "family." In this family, she sees herself as "the school mom" and the students as "my own babies." She knows every student's name "by Labor Day," she says, so she "can greet them and... have a conversation with them." She wants students to know "they are loved" and "they have stability." If students do not have "connections" with the school and their teachers, then, Ms. Franklin says, "the learning... is all a wash."

Ms. Franklin's goal for Thomas Jefferson Elementary School is to build "trusting, collaborative" relationships creating a "greater family" for students and their families. Throughout the year, Ms. Franklin holds "activities" to build "connections" with the families. Thomas Jefferson Elementary School is often a family's "first experience" with the school system, and Mr. Franklin wants to "engage families," and "welcome" them "in the building," so they continue being engaged throughout the student's entire educational career.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Ms. Franklin believes she has “pretty good” relationships with students, staff, and families. Her relationship with students is built on “love” and helping them become “the best thems.” With staff, Ms. Franklin’s focus is on building a team that “understand[s]” and is “aligned with my vision.” Families, she says, are “the trickiest relationships,” because of the amount of “distrust” families have toward the school. She works to “reshape” their understanding of the school from “the school you attended 20 years ago” into “what it is now.” Her goal is to build “trusting, collaborative” relationships between the school and the families so they “feel like they can be involved” and “can voice their concerns,” so they know “their babies” are “in good hands.”

Family and community participation in school activities is “not great,” according to Ms. Franklin. They are “supportive,” she says, but do not attend or participate in events. Sometimes, Ms. Franklin says, “only two families will show up.” To increase attendance and invite them to events, she has varied her methods of communication and start times, but still hears from parents, “I didn’t know anything about that.”

Ms. Franklin communicates with parents, community members, and students through “upbeat” messages. She has different messages for parents and community members than she does for students. “We love your babies,” Ms. Franklin tells parents and community members, “We. Love. Them.” The school, she says, is there to love and protect their children and to help them “do their very best.” When speaking with students, Ms. Franklin’s focus is on helping them be “their best thems.” When she has to discipline a child, she explains to them, “You’re not a bad kid, but you made a bad choice.” Then,

Ms. Franklin reminds the student, “You’re gonna do amazing things, kiddo.” The visit ends, she says, with a “high five, a pound, [or] a hug.”

Ms. Franklin uses social media “for everything.” She sends daily messages and announcements to parents via Remind, and shares photos and messages on her blog, on Twitter, and on Facebook. Ms. Franklin believes people are “fast-paced” and that they want “the goods,” not “fluff.” In response, her messages on social media are short and to the point, such as: “Our fall program is going to be this day, at this time, at this location... Hope to see you there!”

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Ms. Franklin believes the district’s continuous improvement process is “good,” but “confusing.” She says, “I wish there was a different system,” because this “process... is just sketchy.” Ms. Franklin believes the process would improve with “protocols” in place for yearly activities and clear expectations for administrators. “Just tell me what I need to do,” she says.

School improvement at Thomas Jefferson Public Schools begins when the administrative team sets the “district goals.” In the current cycle, their goal is to develop and implement district-wide Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Ms. Franklin believes, “We’re on the right track with this MTSS model.” Ms. Franklin then brings the district-level goals to her leadership team to discuss school goals. This leadership team is composed of four elected representatives, with “at least one representative from each grade level.” After discussing a goal with the leadership team, they discuss it with the staff. The goal, she says, needs to come “from all of us” and be “meaningful to everybody.” Ms. Franklin believes the academic goal for this cycle will probably be

“reading,” but “we all know... our goal” should be based on the social-emotional-behavioral needs of their students. Data is currently preventing them from selecting this as a goal, because she is unsure the data will show them “it was needed,” or show improvement.

Ms. Franklin manages the school improvement process by “staying organized” and using action-oriented agendas for leadership and grade-level team meetings. Before she became principal, Ms. Franklin says, meetings at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School “might” have had an agenda, but “everybody talked” and the meetings turned into “bitch sessions.” She says, there was no “action plan” going into or coming out of the meetings. Ms. Franklin stays organized by reviewing her notes and sharing information in Google docs, and she structures meeting agendas with three points: “Here’s... the concern... here’s the plan of action, and here’s the follow-up needed.” Her intent is to have timely and “meaningful” meetings and she believes having a “plan of action” and noting the “follow-up needed” make them so.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Ms. Franklin’s role in the curriculum selection and implementation processes is to provide oversight. She is “involved with the process,” she says, but relies “a lot” on the leadership team, because “they’re... the implementers.” Ms. Franklin wants to have “input” into the selection process and wants “to know what we’re giving... our kids.” She believes there needs “to be consistency” in the textbooks selected, and that the “scope and sequence should roll” from elementary school through the intermediate school.

Ms. Franklin ensures the curriculum aligns with school goals and standards by knowing the curriculum and performing walk-throughs. “Textbook companies are

smart,” she says, “They’re aligning everything to your standards.” Armed with the knowledge the curriculum addresses their goals and standards, Ms. Franklin conducts walk-through observations to verify instruction is delivered with fidelity to the written curriculum.

Ms. Franklin evaluates instructional and curricular effectiveness through walk-throughs, fidelity checks, lesson-plan checks, and the evaluation process. Grade-level meetings are held “once a week... for the first quarter,” she says, and then “twice a month” afterwards “to visit about where we’re at in our curriculum” and to discuss the “tweaks... we need to make.” At these meetings, teachers discuss student progress and concept mastery. “If there are major concerns” brought up at the grade-level meetings, she says, the “team leaders... bring [them] to leadership team” meetings.

Ms. Franklin is a part of the “checks and balances” used to evaluate the after-school non-curricular programs. To determine if the programs are effective, evaluators identify the number of students participating, the regular attendees, the length of participation per day, and the number of consecutive days in attendance.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Ms. Franklin expects her staff to “behave every single day as a family.” She recognizes, though, that “sometimes, behaving as a family means you don’t get along.” At those times, Ms. Franklin has an “open door” for her teachers to come discuss frustrations and concerns with her. Teachers are expected to “put their best foot forward in front of students,” to present lessons in a “heartfelt” manner, and to have discussions with students “from their knees.” These expectations are shared at the first staff meeting of the year, when Ms. Franklin reminds staff “we are a family here.” She tells them,

“We’re going to have our ups and downs,” but “we’re all adults here and we all have the same purpose in mind.”

While Ms. Franklin will advertise openings on her staff, when she needs to recruit a new staff member, she goes “after people I think would be good.” If Ms. Franklin knows someone she wants in her building, she tells them, “They need to come home.” She invites these prospective teachers to “come and interview.” Nothing, she tells them, is “guaranteed, but I want you on my team.” In interviews, she looks for teachers with whom she makes a genuine connection. The college is a “great resource” for Ms. Franklin, because she can observe potential teachers while they complete observation and practicum hours. If Ms. Franklin thinks a potential staff member does a good job, she begins “actively” recruiting them.

Ms. Franklin begins the staff growth and development process by making “one-on-one” connections. She stresses the importance of taking time out of her morning to ask about a new puppy or grandchild. “If you are missing those little pieces,” Ms. Franklin says, “they’re not going to go to bat for you later” or be there “when you have a crisis or a baby in need.” Beyond building “one-on-one” connections, Ms. Franklin utilizes the district’s mentoring program to help develop her staff. New to the district teachers participate in the district’s two-year mentoring program, in which they discuss district-wide expectations and their evaluation model and build personal connections between staff members. Ms. Franklin expects her teachers to continually improve. If they are not, she will “put some pieces in place” to help them improve, but “I will be right beside you,” she tells them.

Professional development is planned by the district's administrators and implemented at the building level. The district's administrative team meets at the end of the year and during the summer to plan the "professional development... every district member needs" in the upcoming school year. Then, Ms. Franklin plans for building-level implementation with her leadership team. Building-level implementation allows Ms. Franklin to provide her staff with the "kinds of supports" they need, she says. This model of district-level planning with building-level implementation, according to Ms. Franklin, was put in place by the superintendent "to make sure that there's some management, but not micromanagement." She appreciates this approach because of the impact it has on her staff and students.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Ms. Franklin believes systems management practices are "lacking," saying, "You don't know if a professional development worked or not." She continues, "We feel like it's good, and people are using it," but there is no evaluation or documentation in place. Ms. Franklin believes they need "system-wide... top-to-bottom" tools to evaluate a system, to know if it is "working" or not, and to determine what "we fix" and what "we change."

Ms. Franklin's resource allocation decisions are based on student needs and impact. For financial resources, Ms. Franklin bases her plans on teacher expenditures from previous years. To allocate human resources, she focuses on student numbers and needs. Ms. Franklin makes scheduling decisions to provide "common planning time" to teachers to determine student needs, interventions, and other "grade-level work."

Ms. Franklin's site, facilities, services, and equipment decisions and requests are based on students and student safety. While she wants the school to look nice, she does not want it to come at the expense of her students' safety. "Our kids are getting hurt on the playground because of the size of the potholes," she says. Ms. Franklin gets frustrated with buildings and grounds decisions, because "I see... a new scoreboard and new... lawn equipment" elsewhere in the district. "Obviously, we're not getting anywhere with me getting red in the face," she says, so she asks her staff for documentation of injuries, incidents, and needs. After repeatedly requesting repairs, Ms. Franklin provides her documentation and says, "Here it is... tell me why you're not fixing it."

Ms. Franklin uses "team" decisions to set and change rules, expectations, policies, and procedures at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School. "When we set up those three rules.... be safe, be respectful, be responsible," she explains, "Those were all created by our staff." Ms. Franklin does not see herself as "running the school;" she believes it takes a "team" to run the school. She relies on "a lot of communication with the leadership team," and expects them to help lead the grade-level teams.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Ms. Franklin describes Thomas Jefferson Elementary School as an "upbeat" and "positive" family. This culture developed after the district's reorganization when two elementary schools were brought together. "We... had to restart a culture," she said. "We had to restart a sense of community." From that "restart," a family emerged.

The Thomas Jefferson Elementary School family likes to celebrate together. They will gather in the library to share good news, and, like a family, they will share their news

on social media. This family sticks together in good times and bad. “In times of crisis,” or “grief,” Ms. Franklin says, “we come together and support” one another.

The most important component of the school’s culture is the “really solid people,” according to Ms. Franklin. “When you have good people and... you hire good people to be on the team,” they take care of one another and the school. Surrounded by “good people,” Ms. Franklin does not “play... games of hierarchy,” she says. “From our kitchen to the paraprofessionals to custodial to classroom teachers,” she continues, “I don’t feel like any one job is more important than another.”

Ms. Franklin does not rely on surveys to assess Thomas Jefferson Elementary School’s climate and culture. She and the other district administrators may do some formal climate surveys, and they are considering sending informal surveys through Google forms. To “find out” how those in her building are “doing,” Ms. Franklin gathers feedback from her leadership team, she attends “most of the grade-level meetings,” and she visits the teachers’ lounge. The number of “people in the lounge,” she says, “that’s how we assess” the culture.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

As the “school mom,” Ms. Franklin believes she is a “role model” for staff and students. She models appropriate behaviors, actions, and interactions for staff, students, families, and the community in and out of the school. Ms. Franklin believes it is her responsibility to help “teachers... do what they do best,” and to “facilitate the growth of students.”

To Ms. Franklin, ethical practice begins with being honest with people and “looking at everything” through “the lens of a parent.” Adhering to these practices builds

the “trusting, collaborative” relationships Ms. Franklin desires. A third key to ethical practice is being visible to staff. “I could spend two solid days behind my computer catching up,” Ms. Franklin says, but she needs to be “in the classrooms” and “accessible to teachers.” If she is not, “the modeling breaks down,” and so does “the trust.”

Aligning ethical practice and the policies she is asked to manage is “one of the most difficult pieces of the job” for Ms. Franklin. She feels many policies are not practical and are out of touch with those “in the trenches.” When Ms. Franklin presents these policies to her staff, she addresses the “challenges that come” with them, and she acknowledges the teacher’s feelings of being personally “under attack.” Then, Ms. Franklin turns the conversation toward what this will do “for our babies,” and how they can “make this work for us” by focusing on the “support services” these programs will provide. She says, “You just have to spin it and make it practical for us.”

The most influential forces in Ms. Franklin’s efforts to achieve her vision for Thomas Jefferson Elementary School are the people surrounding her. She is inspired by the 20- to 30-year veterans who “haven’t lost their edge,” she says, and by the students as they “figure it out.” When looking at her students, Ms. Franklin sees her own children who “came through this system.” She wants to make the school, and school system, better for them. Finally, Ms. Franklin is moved by “our parents” who “are doing the best they can with what they have at any given moment.”

Themes and Summary

Three themes emerged from Ms. Franklin’s interview: collaboration, family, and love. Ms. Franklin used a team-based approach to leading, managing and improving her school. She built a “school family” to support her students, staff, and their families. This

team- and family-based approach to the principalship influenced her vision for teaching and learning, the relationships she built in the school, curriculum development, staff leadership, and the culture of the school. Her approach to school improvement, curriculum adoption, resource management, and professional ethics was systemic. She wanted to improve the system for her “family” and “team.”

When making decisions, Ms. Franklin often relied on what is best for her “babies,” their needs, and their safety. Her desire to build “trusting, collaborative” relationships with students, staff, and families was founded in meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. To meet those needs, she wanted students and their families to know they are loved and supported. “You have to build the relationships first,” she said, “if our... babies do not know they are loved... then, really, the learning... is all a wash.”

Ms. Franklin was unable to state the mission, but recalled the school would “provide a nurturing environment.” She continued, “The mission statement itself is a little bit long.... It’s kind of fluffy.” She immediately offered the district’s vision statement, which, she said, was “born of the teachers.... We came up with that.” She said the vision “speaks more” to her and the staff than the mission because it is “short” and “sweet.”

The mission statement was posted in the front office, along with the vision statement. It was included in the student handbook and in the school mentoring program materials.

Ms. Franklin did not consider the mission as she led, managed, and improved her school. Other factors and priorities overpowered the mission. Her focus on building a “greater family” for staff, students, and their families was at the top of this list. She

believed in the direction the school was headed, and, therefore, did not look to initiate major change initiatives. She trusted and relied on her leadership team and staff to help her select the next steps, each step of the way. She did not, however, consciously consider the school's mission statement as part of the process.

Case Study #8 - Mr. Matthew Carter, Thomas Jefferson Middle School

Mr. Matthew Carter is the principal at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. He believes a principal is the school leader, manager, and primary communicator. From discipline and attendance, to social media and policy, he says, "We cover a lot."

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Carter's "mantra," which forms the foundation for his vision of teaching and learning, is "student-centered, data-driven, teacher-led." This philosophy developed over the course of his career. As a new principal, he was "a top-down manager." Over time, he discovered the value and importance of using "as little top-down management as possible." This vision was influenced by professors and "really good administrators along the way" who helped him see the value of putting "kids first," making "data-informed" decisions, and sharing leadership through "teamwork."

Mr. Carter's goal is to turn his mantra into practice and build a "student-centered, data-driven, and... teacher-led" school. He communicates this message through "back-to-school in-service" meetings and his actions "throughout the year." Mr. Carter encourages teachers to put "kids first"; build "positive relationships with kids"; to "approach everything... as a team"; and to study, understand, and use data.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Mr. Carter describes his relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community as “trusting” and “positive.” When he arrived at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, Mr. Carter spent his first two years “sitting back and learning and listening and trying to figure out what was needed.” He did not implement any “big systems changes” until he developed positive relationships with staff, parents, and the community. Mr. Carter believes the parents and the community “trust” he is “making the best decisions,” for the “kids and the school,” and their “relationships are positive.”

Mr. Carter believes family and community participation is “pretty average” at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. Attendance at parent-teacher conferences approaches “80 percent or more,” but, he says, unless there is a major concern or issue, “open forum” discussions have a low turnout. Attendance at activities is “super high,” and, Mr. Carter continues, parents are “pretty positive.”

Communication and storytelling is one of the principal’s “major roles,” according to Mr. Carter. “If we don’t tell our story,” he says, “someone else will.” As he tells their “story,” Mr. Carter is “as positive as possible,” and focuses on the “great things our kids... [and] teachers are doing.” He shares messages of achievement and success because, he believes, “Success... breeds more success.”

Mr. Carter’s method of communication changes based on the audience. To communicate with staff members, he holds meetings. To recognize “students who’ve done a good job,” Mr. Carter uses quarterly student assemblies. To communicate with parents, he relies on social media. Mr. Carter shares pictures and videos of classrooms, learning, and achievements on social media, because that is “where our parents are.”

Facebook is his main social media tool, but as parents move “towards Twitter,” so does Mr. Carter.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Mr. Carter describes the school improvement process at Thomas Jefferson Middle School as “continuous” and “structured.” He frames their school improvement process as finding “ways to improve student learning” and doing what is “best for kids.” His school improvement focus is on setting goals and choosing actions to “meet those goals.”

School improvement goals at Thomas Jefferson Public Schools are based on recommendations from the previous cycle’s external review team, and set at the district level. State and grant requirements are also considered when setting district and building goals, Mr. Carter says. The district steering committee, composed of teachers from every building, administrators, and parents, sets common district goals, and buildings set their own additional, “grade-level appropriate” goals. To set the building goals, Mr. Carter builds a “framework” with goals, objectives, and actions he thinks “we need to take,” and presents this framework to his leadership team to gather input and collect feedback. The leadership team is composed of Mr. Carter, the after-school program coordinator, and four elected teachers. If the leadership team supports the plan, he believes other teachers will as well. The current school improvement goals for the middle school are: to improve student performance in all academic areas, to improve student behaviors through Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports, and to improve access to the district’s improvement plan. The first and third goals are district goals. The student behavior goal is specific to the middle school, and is required by a grant they received.

Mr. Carter maintains forward progress by keeping their school improvement goals at “the core” of “what we’re trying to do.” New goals do not mean “letting everything else drop,” he says, and he ties “everything together” to maintain the process’s continuous nature. If positive actions can continue while implementing their new improvement actions, Mr. Carter believes they will continue finding “ways to improve.”

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Carter’s role in the curriculum of the school is to ensure “the adopted curriculum is actually followed.” The teachers and district assessment and curriculum coordinator complete the curriculum adoption process, and teachers verify the alignment of the curriculum to their standards. When Mr. Carter performs walk-throughs, he expects teachers to be following the adopted curriculum “with fidelity.”

Walk-throughs are Mr. Carter’s primary tool to determine if students are being taught and learning a curriculum aligned to the school’s goals and standards. Teachers are expected to post student learning outcomes daily, and during walk-throughs he uses the posted learning outcomes to determine the day’s focus. “It doesn’t take very long,” he says, “to see if that’s the actual focus.” While Mr. Carter does not collect daily lesson plans, he expects them to contain the student learning outcome, the standards being addressed, and the accommodations being used in the classroom. Mr. Carter will ask to review a teacher’s lesson plans if he has a concern with what he sees during walk-throughs.

Mr. Carter evaluates curricular and instructional effectiveness through walk-throughs and test scores. Whether conducting a “formal walk-through” or just “stepping in” for a few minutes, Mr. Carter is able to visit every classroom “at some point”

throughout each week. Because of these frequent classroom visits, he has “a pretty good sense of where students are” in their learning process, and “what’s being taught in every single classroom.” Mr. Carter believes “test scores matter” when evaluating the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and he relies on fall and spring standardized assessment scores to determine if “students are growing.”

Mr. Carter uses different evaluation tools for their non-curricular programs. The after-school program is part of the 21st Century Learning Program and has built-in self-evaluation and external reviews. When evaluating athletic and academic activities, Mr. Carter considers “participation… because we want kids involved,” and if “kids are having fun.”

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Carter expects his staff to be “professional.” During the previous school improvement cycle, the staff at Thomas Jefferson Public Schools aligned their evaluation framework to the NDE’s professional standards for teachers to clarify and define professional practices. Mr. Carter believes professionalism requires teachers to build relationships with students, to “keep kids first,” and to do what is “best for kids.” Mr. Carter communicates his expectations “through the lens” of their evaluation framework and the NDE’s professional standards in “staff meetings… trainings, and professional development.”

At Thomas Jefferson Public Schools, the building principals hire their own staff members. Mr. Carter feels “pretty lucky” to have a college nearby. Many of his teachers studied in the college’s education program. During interviews, Mr. Carter sells candidates on the “good reputation” of Thomas Jefferson Public Schools as a “high-quality school

district” in a “pretty nice... location.” The interview team, usually consisting of three or four people, is composed of Mr. Carter, a leadership team member, and at least one department member. Together, they “make a team decision” on who will be the “best fit.”

Mr. Carter relies on the district’s mentoring program to develop and retain high-quality professionals. All new-to-the-district teachers, regardless of their experience level, he says, participate in the two-year mentoring program. The program meets on a monthly basis to discuss upcoming events, “what’s going on,” and “the nuts and bolts” of teaching at Thomas Jefferson Public Schools. He and the other principals use these meetings to “get a feeling of where teachers are at.” According to Mr. Carter, a key benefit of the mentoring program is the connections teachers make with teachers in their building and throughout the district. “Isolation,” Mr. Carter says, is “the number one new teacher killer.” He believes the mentoring program directly combats isolation. He also assigns new teachers informal mentors from their department to introduce them to the building and its staff and to be a resource for the new teacher.

Mr. Carter aligns professional development to “our school improvement goals” and their evaluation framework. All professional development, in Mr. Carter’s opinion, needs to “improve... school for kids.” Unlike in other buildings in the district, common planning time is built into the middle school’s daily schedule. Because of this, Mr. Carter is able to schedule professional development, data study, or grade-level meetings during their staff meetings held every other Friday afternoon.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Carter measures the effectiveness of his systems and operations through continual “monitoring.” Between “school safety drills” and “facility walk-throughs,” he is able to determine if things are “clean and working.”

Resource allocation decisions, Mr. Carter says, are based on “need” and how an expenditure will “help kids” and improve “student learning.” Financial and material resources are limited, he says, but they “do the best we can” and are “kind of thrifty.” Mr. Carter reviews every requisition to determine if it is “actually needed” and cuts “as much fluff” as possible. Mr. Carter’s strategy for time management is to build time for teachers “in the schedule as much as I can.” Teachers have a 75-minute planning period every day, plus daily common planning time to meet with “grade-level teams.” Managing human resources is “tough,” Mr. Carter says, because the expenses continue to grow “over time.” While he would “love more human resources,” it is not a “luxury” they often get.

Mr. Carter considers three items when managing the school’s site, facilities, services and equipment: safety, accessibility, and efficiency. Facility safety, he says, “is first.” He says facility accessibility is a challenge because the Middle School is a three-level building, but it is “important.” Mr. Carter manages his limited financial resources, in part, through facility efficiency. He continually searches for ways to make his site, facilities, services, and equipment “more efficient.”

When reviewing and discussing expectations, rules, policies and procedures, Mr. Carter’s first concern is enforcing district policy in his building. To develop building-level policy, Mr. Carter begins by understanding the desired outcome of the policy they

are writing. He involves teachers, students, and parents in the building-level policy development process. Mr. Carter builds the framework for the policy, and then brings it to teachers for feedback. Once he makes the teachers' suggested changes, he presents the framework to parents and students for their feedback.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mr. Carter describes the culture at Thomas Jefferson Middle School as “caring” and “trusting.” He says they are “results-oriented, maybe to a fault,” because of his focus on data. Mr. Carter believes this culture is a product of constantly “pushing” his mantra of “student-centered, data-driven, teacher-led.” When he arrived at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, the “trust” and “climate” were “a little broken.” Mr. Carter spent his first year, “sitting back and listening” and building the “trust, teamwork, and relationships” that became the foundation for the school’s current culture.

Mr. Carter believes celebrations are an important component of teamwork, and they celebrate the success of the district, school, teachers, and students “as a team.” Celebrating “individual students and their successes” is especially important for students, because it helps them enjoy school. If students are “enjoying school,” Mr. Carter says, “they’re going to do better.” At monthly award ceremonies, Mr. Carter recognizes teacher-selected “students-of-the-month,” students who have demonstrated extraordinary effort, and students who have perfect attendance.

Mr. Carter assesses the climate and culture at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in several ways. Every two years, teachers, parents, and students “do surveys” as part of the school improvement process. Eighth grade students complete “exit surveys” about their experience at the middle school. Mr. Carter collects “anecdotal feedback” from teachers,

students, and parents to understand feelings, concerns, and issues they may have with the school. He also uses the “overall feeling” of the building to assess the school’s climate.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

From Mr. Carter’s perspective, the principal is a leader, a manager, and a communicator. He believes the principal must “lead by example” and “from the front.” They must be “present” and “available,” with a clear “vision” and “expectations.” The principal, according to Mr. Carter, is the manager of “everything” in the school, including facilities, teaching and learning, and safety. As a manager, Mr. Carter believes the principal must strive for “consistency” and “efficiency.” The principal is the school’s primary communicator, according to Mr. Carter, and must share a “common” positive message. As a communicator, he says, the principal should “have a connection with the community” and should be at events “cheering on the kids and talking to parents.”

Mr. Carter believes the foundation to ethical practice is built on “honesty... integrity,” and an “openness to personal and professional growth.” With these three characteristics, he believes one can “lead by example.” He believes acting with honesty, integrity, and “a growth mindset” eliminates most challenges, “no matter what the policies are,” and, he continues, “I don’t think you need to worry about aligning anything, because you’re being a professional.” Mr. Carter’s biggest practical challenges come from mandates. In most cases, he believes “the intentions” behind mandates “are really good.” Unfunded mandates, he says, make things “tough,” but “not impossible” if a principal is “creative.”

The biggest influences on Mr. Carter’s ability to achieve his vision for Thomas Jefferson Middle School are teachers, parents, and politics. “Teachers are a big force...

within the building,” he says, “and they should be,” based on their impact on students, families, the school, and the community. Parents are a significant outside influence on Mr. Carter’s ability to achieve his vision. Their influence is felt “more at the activities level” than in curriculum or instruction. In terms of teaching and learning, Mr. Carter says, “Parents generally trust that we’re doing our jobs.” Politics are an “intrusive” external influence on Mr. Carter’s school, because they exist at the local, state, and national level. Mr. Carter sees each of these influences as opportunities “to help problem-solve.” Once he understands the problem, Mr. Carter will work to “come up with solutions.” Unfortunately, with policy and politics, there are not always easy answers, and “sometimes,” he says, they must accept “the way it is.”

Themes and Summary

For Mr. Carter, the way it is and needs to be was “student-centered, data-driven, and teacher-led.” He led Thomas Jefferson Middle School according to this mantra, and instilled the value of these three characteristics in his teachers. He believed students should be “first,” decisions should be “data-informed,” and leadership should be shared “with teachers as much as we can.” His mantra directly influenced his approach to teaching and learning and the culture of the school, and it framed decision making throughout the school.

While his personal mantra was his main focus when leading his school, several themes emerged in Mr. Carter’s interview: doing what is best for kids, teamwork, and trust. These themes presented themselves as part of his decision-making process. The first was what is “best for kids,” and it was the foundation for school improvement, staff leadership, and resource allocation decisions. His next decision-making factor was

“teamwork.” By bringing people into the decision-making process “as much as we can,” Mr. Carter was reinforcing his culture, providing staff leadership opportunities, and increasing “buy-in” in the operation of the school. Trust was the final key factor in Mr. Carter’s decision-making process. While Mr. Carter trusted his staff to help lead the school, he also recognized and respected the trust the Board of Education and superintendent placed in him to ensure the effectiveness of the school.

When asked about the district’s mission, Mr. Carter said, “Our district mission is incredibly important,” but “I don’t know” it “by heart.” He said it “encompasses” the core academic areas, wellness, lifelong learning, technology, and “preparing students for the future.” Mr. Carter was not sure he believes a school mission can actually be achieved, because “there is always more that you can do”; but, he continued, “you know if you’re on the right track.”

The school mission statement was posted in the front office of the school, and was stated as part of the student handbook and the new-to-district mentoring program.

The district mission was absent in Mr. Carter’s discussion of his work. He cited the district’s vision statement several times throughout the discussion, and it was posted in classrooms and the principal’s office. Mr. Carter recognized the importance of the mission, but it was not part of his decision-making process or a consideration in his leadership and management of the school. The school mission was replaced in this role by his personal philosophy, putting “kids first,” and doing what is “best for kids.”

Case Study #9 - Mr. Michael Wilson, Thomas Jefferson High School

Mr. Michael Wilson is the principal at Thomas Jefferson High School. The role of principal is “growing,” he says, and as it grows, “you can’t do anything great because of the amount of things that get put on the plate.”

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Wilson’s vision for teaching and learning is “to provide and preserve quality instruction.” When he became principal, Mr. Wilson knew the school had “quality instructors,” and he knew providing “quality instruction” would not be a problem. Preserving quality instruction, which to Mr. Wilson means protecting instructional time, was his challenge.

Mr. Wilson’s goal is to have students in class receiving quality instruction as often as possible. He faces a number of obstacles while trying to achieve this goal. School-based activities, school assemblies, and watching movies in class take away at instructional time. Activities regularly take “80 to 85 percent” of the students out of school. Chronic absenteeism, according to Mr. Wilson, is an ongoing problem. He has implemented a number of policy and schedule changes to address lost instructional time. To combat chronic absenteeism, Mr. Wilson communicates with students and parents through a variety of media to explain the impact of missing school and the school’s efforts to fight the effects of absenteeism.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Mr. Wilson describes his relationships with students, staff, families, and the community as one built on “love” and “service.” He wants students, families, and the community to see him as “the school dad,” and to know the school “stands” for loving

and serving students “in an equitable way.” To emphasize this, Mr. Wilson regularly uses “the word love… in front of the kids,” and “their parents.” Students respond by discussing troubles, “suicide ideations,” and other “issues,” with staff members, and Mr. Wilson believes “we have to see that as a good thing,” because it means “the relationship piece is working.”

Family and community participation is, according to Mr. Wilson, “similar to any other high school in a town this size.” Families and community members show up for “sporting events” and “music concerts,” and he says, parents attend the different “meetings,” conferences, and “workshops” at the school. The district invites parents and community members to serve on the district safety team and on the strategic planning committee. As part of grant requirements, the school invited “33 different businesses, business owners, and representatives” to help “tweak” their curriculum to address the skills and knowledge they believe students need. Community and family support “ebbs and flows,” but “when we need it, and we ask them,” he says, “we get good support.”

Mr. Wilson communicates “our vision” of loving, caring, and serving students equitably with staff, students, families, and the community but will also sprinkle in “whatever vision is on my brain at the time.” He believes communication needs to be “authentic” and students need to know “you come from a place of love.” In addition to his messages of love and support, Mr. Wilson uses a select group of students to share positive messages throughout the school to help him build the “social reserves” he may need “when you have that bad snow day call,” or “when something goes south.”

“Everything we do,” to communicate with families and the community, Mr. Wilson says, is through social media. “We don’t mail much,” he continues, beyond report

cards and health information, but “we’re all over the place” on social media. While Mr. Wilson posts messages to the school website through his blog, most of his communication comes through social media. The school has Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, and Mr. Wilson and his guidance counselor produce live Facebook “broadcasts once a week.” Audio versions of these broadcasts are posted on “nine different platforms,” he says, including iTunes and Spotify.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

When asked about Thomas Jefferson Public Schools’s commitment to school improvement, Mr. Wilson says, “We’re all in.” They have a “war room” in their central office with a white board containing district- and school-level improvement plans. This board is “slowly” filled with their goals, strategies and actions for “the next five to seven years,” from year one of the school improvement cycle up to the date of their accreditation review. “Then,” he says, “when we finish... we wipe that board completely clean and start over.”

Different processes are used to set district- and school-level school improvement goals. District goals, according to Mr. Wilson, are based on recommendations from the previous external review. School-level plans, he says, are built by the staff through a series of meetings with input from parents and supported by the ESU. As the staff chooses goals, they begin selecting actions and strategies to take, and identifying the resources they will need to achieve the goal. The goals for the current cycle are projected to be: 100% of all students will meet proficiency or expected growth, 100% of all students and families will be informed of the importance of attendance, and they will

develop a district school improvement website to house and share school improvement data.

For Mr. Wilson, school improvement leadership, and leadership in general, is like driving an “old herd of cattle.” He believes “you have to be a little bit of everywhere,” and “you shouldn’t stay in any one of the positions” too long. “It’s constantly moving around the herd and seeing where you need to be,” Mr. Wilson says. There are times when “you’re in the herd,” he says, and times when “you have to get behind and... push and nudge.” Mr. Wilson is currently pushing his teachers to “provide and preserve quality instruction,” and nudging them to select attendance as a school improvement goal.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Wilson believes his role in curriculum and instruction is one of “support.” He wants teachers, together with the curriculum director, to select and implement new curriculum. Mr. Wilson’s role, he believes, is to “make sure” the curriculum aligns to the standards. Mr. Wilson believes he has a “really good, quality staff,” and his job is to “get the hell out of the way and let the teachers” teach.

To ensure students are learning a curriculum aligned with the school’s goals, Mr. Wilson relies on data. “When we choose a goal,” he says, “we define the data ahead of time.... because there’s no sense having a goal if you can’t check your data.” Mr. Wilson uses data to assess the strategies being implemented and the effectiveness of resources being used in classrooms. The key to this process, Mr. Wilson says, is “finding the data that supports the goals we’re working on.”

Mr. Wilson assesses the instructional and curricular effectiveness through “walk-throughs” and “test scores.” Gathering data from walk-throughs is an important part of

their instructional model, which was implemented after a previous external school improvement visit. The instructional model, he says, provides a “universal language” to discuss effective instruction. “Ultimately,” though, Mr. Wilson believes the “truth” will be told by state and local “test scores.”

Mr. Wilson and his activities director evaluate non-academic programs. “All of our coaches and sponsors get evaluated yearly,” by the activities director, he says. Activities without “paid sponsors,” Mr. Wilson continues, are evaluated yearly “with the kids” who suggest changes to the programs. Additional program feedback is collected from parents and students through surveys and conversations.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Wilson’s expectation for staff members is “to provide quality instruction.” He discusses this expectation at staff meetings on early dismissal days. These discussions, Mr. Wilson says, center on collaboratively establishing “minimum” standards for students and staff at “a high performing high school.” He does not dictate student expectations for staff members, but Mr. Wilson does expect staff to hold students to these expectations and be “consistent with what their peers want to accomplish.”

The local teacher shortage weighs heavily on Mr. Wilson when recruiting and selecting high-quality staff members. His favorite tactic for hiring teachers is to “steal them.” If he knows good teachers who may be interested in teaching at Thomas Jefferson High School, he encourages a leadership team member to contact them and ask them to apply. If a former student is the good teacher, someone will “cold-call” them, he says, to encourage them to apply, and tell them “You need to come home.” Throughout the search and interview, Mr. Wilson “constantly” promotes his “quality school.”

Thomas Jefferson Public Schools utilizes a two-year mentor program for all new-to-the-district teachers. “We meet once a month,” Mr. Wilson says, “just to talk.”

Building mentors are assigned by Mr. Wilson, and together with the leadership team and other staff members, they provide new teachers “good support” within their building.

District-level professional development planning, according to Mr. Wilson, is “a collaborative effort.” While it may sound “negative,” Mr. Wilson says different priorities surface during these discussions and selecting district-wide professional development becomes a “fight.” He continues, “I want more tactical tips for teachers for classroom management,” but the middle school principal “wants more PBIS.” Individual building principals determine the topics and focus of building-level professional development. Mr. Wilson chooses professional development based on “needs” and “our vision,” he says, and then either brings in a presenter or presents the session himself.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Wilson ensures operational and systems effectiveness through “constant monitoring” and communication. Every morning, he has coffee with the head of maintenance, the transportation director, the high school custodian, and the activities director to discuss the upcoming day and “what we need.” These daily meetings, Mr. Wilson says, help him “maintain relationships” with the people “who take care of our plant.”

For the past ten years, and into the foreseeable future, Mr. Wilson says, “we’ll never spend a dollar more than we did last year.” Mr. Wilson knows this and manages his resources based on this knowledge. Mr. Wilson does not set “budgetary guidelines or

limits” on individual teachers or departments; he focuses on the “overall building dollar.”

Mr. Wilson’s spending priorities are “overall need” and specific projects.

Student needs and student safety drive decisions related to site, facilities, services, and equipment as well as rules, expectations, policies, and procedures. “Student needs,” Mr. Wilson says, are a “top” priority. Specifically, he targets site, facility, services, and equipment projects that will “most impact students.” Closely behind student impact, for Mr. Wilson, is school and student safety. Mr. Wilson works with staff members to review and develop additions or changes to the rules, expectations, policies, and procedures at Thomas Jefferson High School. His teachers are a “professional group,” and they understand their own “wants and needs” come after student impact and student safety.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mr. Wilson describes the school culture at Thomas Jefferson High School as “fearless.” He has been working to instill this attitude in staff and students for three years. Be fearless and make mistakes, he tells them, “That’s just learning.” This culture of fearlessness is built on a foundation of loving, caring for, and serving one another. This attitude is woven into nearly every part of the school, including the relationships between administration, staff members, and students.

When discussing celebrations at Thomas Jefferson High School, Mr. Wilson freely admits, “I’m not a rewards guy.” He wants students to be intrinsically motivated to do well. Celebrations need to be “authentic,” Mr. Wilson says, and “praise” is one of the “most authentic things we do.” While he is “all for” celebrations “where I’m standing on stage,” Mr. Wilson believes “starting a trend” on social media by generating likes and multiple views is a form of real, authentic praise students recognize and appreciate.

According to Mr. Wilson, the most important parts of their school culture are the positive relationships, the fearless attitude, and the “umbrella” of loving and serving one another. “Positive relationships,” he says, “make for a safe school.” Mr. Wilson believes a fearless attitude allows people to make mistakes and learn from them. Their “overall umbrella” of “loving and serving kids and each other,” Mr. Wilson says, allows students and staff to know they are in a safe environment and are supported in everything they do.

Building principals assess the culture and climate of their schools through surveys as part of the district’s school improvement process. Mr. Wilson likes to collect informal feedback from staff and students as well. Mr. Wilson knows he influences the school culture, but “I don’t control it,” he says. “We all own the culture,” and “when you can get other people to own it,” Mr. Wilson believes, “that’s when you know you’re doing it right.”

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Wilson views himself as “the school dad to kids,” and as “support for the teachers.” As the school dad, he works to wrap students in a “hug” of loving and caring. Mr. Wilson believes other principals may identify instructional leader as part of their role, but “I just don’t feel I can stay ahead as the instructional leader... so I don’t really try to.” He continues, “I just try to make sure that we’re providing and preserving quality instruction.”

Mr. Wilson believes ethical practice is about protecting students, professionalism, and constantly promoting and standing up for “what’s right.” Protecting students, though, is his first priority. Mr. Wilson feels it is his responsibility to protect the “innocence that comes with kids” and to “support” them when they need it.

Aligning ethical practice with local, state, and national policies is simple for Mr. Wilson because, “doing what’s right is what’s right,” and it is his job to implement the policies he is given. Unfunded mandates place a strain on Mr. Wilson, his school, and his community, he says, by requiring the continual investment of time, money, and energy “we don’t have.”

Mr. Wilson believes schools “should be accountable to the public,” which is one of many legislative initiatives he has seen as a principal. AQuESTT, he believes is “better” than other initiatives and is a move in “the right direction.” Mr. Wilson thinks selecting the ACT as the state assessment for juniors was a step in the wrong direction, because it “is not appropriate for all kids... and it doesn’t assess the state standards.”

As he reflects on the most influential forces affecting his ability to achieve his vision for the school, Mr. Wilson identifies issues related to attendance, mandates, and student mental health. He believes “the state change in mandatory attendance to the age of 18 is a good thing,” because it makes it “harder for kids to drop out of school.” As he considers the “growing” responsibilities of the principal and school, he says, “Sometimes I just want the state or federal mandates to slow down a little bit.” Mr. Wilson believes “student mental health” is the biggest issue facing his school, and he would like to “better address” students, “their mental health,” and the “community services” students and families need.

Themes and Summary

Three themes emerged from Mr. Wilson’s interview: the importance of quality instruction, supporting his staff and students, and love. Mr. Wilson’s focus as an instructional leader was on preserving and providing quality instruction. This was his

vision for teaching and learning and it directly influenced his views on school improvement, instructional leadership, staff leadership, and the culture of the school. Mr. Wilson was able to maintain this focus because he has “good people” in his building teaching his students and taking care of everything from transportation to maintaining “our plant.”

Underlying his desire “to preserve and provide quality instruction” was Mr. Wilson’s desire to support staff and students. Thomas Jefferson High School, Mr. Wilson believed, should be a place where they love, care for, and serve one another and students. This philosophy directly impacted his vision for teaching and learning, his relationships, systems management, the school culture, and his view of professional ethics. Together, Mr. Wilson’s desire to preserve and protect quality instruction and to create a school where they love, care for, and serve one another molded Thomas Jefferson High School into the school it is today.

Mr. Wilson described the mission as a “logo with... the core academic piece, the fine arts... all wrapped into one.” He believed feedback from the strategic planning committee, parents, and the community assists them in knowing if they are achieving their mission.

The district’s mission statement was posted in the front office of the school and was included in the student handbook and as part of the mentoring program.

Mr. Wilson preferred to consider the district’s vision. “What I like about our vision statement,” he said, “is we will never be there.” The district vision statement was posted in the hallways, classrooms, and in Mr. Wilson’s office. It was also stated in or on

a number of documents, including the student handbook, the district mentoring program, and the teacher evaluation form.

When he discussed the district's mission statement, Mr. Wilson said, it is "so broad that about anything you do is gonna connect to the mission statement." This may be why Mr. Wilson viewed the mission statement more as a checklist for prioritizing decisions than as a motivational tool. The mission was used to evaluate the school by outside entities, like the external review team, community partners, and parents more than it was by Mr. Wilson to lead, manage, and improve the school.

Case Study #10 - Mr. Cory Mills, Calvin Coolidge Elementary School

Mr. Cory Mills is the principal at Calvin Coolidge Elementary School. Mr. Mills graduated from Calvin Coolidge Public Schools, and it is the only school in which he has taught, coached, or served as an administrator.

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Mills's vision for teaching and learning is to discover the strengths and passions of his students. To accomplish this, he says staff and students need to build positive relationships. Mr. Mills believes positive relationships between students and teachers can drive student achievement. He encourages teachers to uncover students' interests, strengths, and skills. These interests, strengths, and skills are "what's best" within students and by building on them, Mr. Mills believes the teachers and the school are able to "push kids and get the best out of them."

Mr. Mills's goals are to do "what's best for kids" and to "do what I can to help kids." These goals connect to his vision for teaching and learning through his concern for students and their futures. He is continually communicating this message of bringing out

“the best” and doing “what’s best for kids” to staff, parents, and the Board of Education. According to Mr. Mills, he wants students to understand, “You’re a lot more successful and enjoy life [more] if you are... doing what you love.”

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

This is Mr. Mills’s has been at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools for a number of years. His relationships with parents and students have changed over time. Relationships with students and parents are different when you are a coach or a teacher in the classroom than when you are an administrator, he says, because “When you coach and [teach]... you’re interacting with [students] daily and you’re with them so much more.” He continues, “When you’re an administrator... those relationships... change... because you don’t see [students] as often.”

Mr. Mills believes his relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community is “very good.” Adopting PBIS has helped build positive relationships throughout the school, he says, by rewarding students for positive behavior, and “they love that.” Building positive relationships with students is a priority for Mr. Mills. Little things, like giving “high fives on the way out” and playing “random games of Uno” help him build and maintain relationships with students. He builds positive relationships with parents and community members by sending notes home, communicating through the school newsletter, and updating Facebook, because “that’s where they all are.”

Mr. Mills believes community participation with the school is very good, though, he says, “I don’t know if it’s as good as it [was] in the past.” The rural population surrounding the school is highly involved, but the demographics of the people who live in

town have changed. “A lot of different families have moved into the community,” he says, and, “for whatever reason, a higher percentage are not as involved with the school.”

Mr. Mills communicates a number of messages to his students, staff, parents, and the community. The theme he communicates most is Calvin Coolidge (CC) P.R.I.D.E., which, he says, is “on about everything I send out.” CC P.R.I.D.E serves double meaning for Calvin Coolidge Elementary School. Inside the school, P.R.I.D.E stands for “Problem-solving, Respect, Integrity, Dependable, Effort.” It reinforces their PBIS efforts. Once this message is outside the school and in the hands of community members and parent organizations, it becomes a message of school pride. Mr. Mills communicates via newsletters, letters home, and through Facebook, which is the only social media platform he uses for school. He uses Facebook to share “basic communication” and to communicate events.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

The school improvement process at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools is a data-driven process. The school improvement team is composed of the superintendent, Mr. Mills, the jr.-sr. high school principal, the curriculum director, the technology coordinator, two teachers from the elementary school, and two or three teachers from the high school. To begin the school improvement goal setting process, the team compiles student standardized assessment scores and collects parent survey data. They study data looking for low trending areas. They also consider other areas they feel need improvement, giving special attention to core curriculum areas. These considerations help them make informed decisions and formulate goal ideas. Once the data study is complete,

the rest of the certified and classified staff joins the school improvement team to determine their school improvement goal.

Once the goal is set, the staff selects multiple strategies to implement. The school improvement team then begins planning for their two-hour professional development meetings and setting the meeting agendas. During the in-service meetings, held every other week, staff members are trained on the strategies being implemented. Newly trained, they return to their classrooms to begin implementing their new teaching strategies. “Sometimes,” Mr. Mills says, “they work, and sometimes they do not.” The current school improvement goal for Calvin Coolidge Elementary School is to “improve writing.”

Maintaining forward momentum and progress in the school improvement process can be challenging, according to Mr. Mills. Each time “something new comes up,” like new state requirements, Mr. Mills says, something else, like school improvement, falls by the “wayside.” To combat this, he says, an administrator must “keep bringing it up.” He continues, “If you put it on the backburner... they lose interest in it. They... move on to something else.” Even as an administrator, he says, “It’s tough... to keep that focus on that goal and then don’t move on until you’ve attained that goal.”

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Mills, describes himself as “definitely involved” in the curriculum, even though the district recently hired a curriculum director who handles the “day-to-day curriculum questions.” Mr. Mills is more involved with leading the curriculum selection and adoption processes.

The multi-step curriculum selection process can take up to a year to complete. While he could make curriculum decisions alone, Mr. Mills feels bringing a team of teachers, and their input, into the process is important because it “helps your culture.” This team spends time looking at curriculum and comparing it to their goals and standards to determine if it will address them. Then, they travel to other schools; meet with teachers, parents, and students from those schools; discuss the curriculum; and review those schools’ student achievement scores. “Test scores drive a lot,” he says. The team also considers the school and district budget in the curriculum selection process. “You always want the best curriculum,” but, he says, there are “some things to think about budget-wise, too.”

Mr. Mills enlists the help of the curriculum director to ensure effective instructional practices are used in the classroom. He and the curriculum director perform informal walk-through observations and formal evaluations, and then provide professional development “opportunities for our teachers to get better,” and, he says, “we can always get better.” When considering curricular and instructional effectiveness, Mr. Mills reviews test scores to understand “how your kids are performing on different assessments.”

Mr. Mills uses surveys to evaluate their non-curricular programs and opportunities, which include: gifted programs, Reading Classics, the Spelling Bee, Destination Imagination, and elementary honor choirs. Parents and students are surveyed, and parents always seem to want “a little bit more... to challenge... their gifted students,” he says. The school facilities are used by after-school athletic teams and clubs, but those are community-based, not school-based, so Mr. Mills does not evaluate those programs.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Mills expects his staff to work hard and to build relationships with students. He expects his teachers to uncover student strengths, to “adapt [their] instruction” to their students’ strengths, and “to bring out the best in every child.” Relationships, Mr. Mills believes, are something “you’ve just got to have.” He communicates these expectations explicitly and “everywhere,” he says, by sharing them in “emails… branding… [and] staff meetings.”

Recruiting and hiring is a challenge at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools. Finding teachers and support staff is “tough,” according to Mr. Mills. To find paraprofessionals for his school, he speaks directly with community members who may be interested in working at the school. Recruiting and hiring teachers is a challenge as well. Even more of a challenge, he says, “is recruiting good young teachers and getting them to stay.”

Mr. Mills believes retaining an individual “comes back to climate.” He strives to “provide a good working environment for them,” and to build relationships with staff members to let them know they are “wanted… needed… valued,” and respected. Individual professional growth and development, he says, is an important component to creating a positive working environment and retaining staff members. Mr. Mills believes it is his job to be supportive of teachers and their goals, to help them attain their goals, and to be there for them.

Whole-staff professional development is created by the administration and the school improvement team because of the close connection between professional development and school improvement. Together, they create a plan for professional development based on assessment and survey data and conversations with teachers. They

build professional development based on what they feel is most “needed for our district,” and “for our students,” says Mr. Mills. They also discuss the instructional model and school safety at their two-hour late-start in-service meetings.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Mills’s operations and systems management approach is goal-driven. He works with teams of individuals to set goals and to put systems or processes in place to achieve those goals. Once the system or process is underway, he and his team gather input from staff and students via surveys to determine if goals have been achieved or if new goals need to be set. He aims to have true systems and processes in place to achieve their goals.

The superintendent allocates specific resources to Mr. Mills for his building. Mr. Mills then divides those resources among each of his teachers, and they create their list of purchase requests for the year. Mr. Mills asks teachers to prioritize their requests, and to explain how purchases will “help student achievement [and] instruction.” The most important factor to Mr. Mills when considering resource allocation, though, is students. He says, “I always come back to what’s best for kids.”

As Mr. Mills manages his site, facilities, and services, he considers two major factors: cost and safety. The facility must be safe for students, and it must be made safe in an affordable way. While discussing the site and facilities, Mr. Mills refers to a recent playground renovation. Throughout the process, he balanced student safety and project costs, managing “what pieces of equipment we [could] afford and what’s safe and what’s not.”

School and student safety drives many of the policy, procedure, rule, and expectation changes Mr. Mills and the other administrators at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools make. This team reviews the previous year's events to determine "what happened," and, he says, "what... we need to change." The administrative team also considers advice from legal and safety experts. The school's attorneys provide updates and advice on policies and procedures, and local safety experts, like the area police and emergency management system managers, provide recommendations for school and student safety.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mr. Mills believes Calvin Coolidge Elementary School has a "very positive" school culture. The implementation of PBIS, and its reinforcement of positive behaviors and interactions, has made a big difference in the school's culture. Mr. Mills influences the development of this positive culture by rewarding teachers and students for their positive choices and actions. Then, he celebrates his teachers and students by letting "the community know of all the good things that are happening... here." Mr. Mills visits the community center and local churches to share positive messages from the school, which reinforces positive behaviors and actions and strengthens the positive culture of the school.

Mr. Mills believes celebrations should be fun and exciting moments of pride for students. He also believes they should be teaching moments, to "let the kids know why" they are celebrating. The school hosts a monthly celebration recognizing students who have received "High Fives" from teachers for demonstrating exceptional or extraordinary problem-solving, respect, integrity, dependability, and effort. The "High Five" is a note

which gets posted in the classroom, and celebrates the student's positive behavior. There is an elementary school-wide goal for "High Fives" for the year, and if the school achieves their goal, they receive a reward, like going to a movie.

The most valuable piece of the culture, in Mr. Mills's opinion, is the positive relationships built between the staff and the students. Positive relationships, he says, help staff members discover "the good in kids," and "bring out the best in kids." Additionally, positive relationships can defuse situations that might otherwise lead to power struggles.

Mr. Mills is continually assessing his school culture. There are formal measures, such as surveys and observations, which give him data to analyze and may lead to potential changes. Conversations, though, are his most accessible tool for measuring the culture. The staff, he says, "will tell you... if someone's unhappy or not." Armed with this information, he continues his work building positive relationships and a positive culture.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Mills believes his role in the school is to do "whatever is best for kids." To accomplish this, he provides students with a safe and positive learning environment, where positive relationships can be built. Once he builds this environment, he knows he must make decisions based on "what is truly best for kids."

As he considers what is best for students, Mr. Mills asks himself, "Is this something that I... would want my own child to do?" As an administrator, he says, "you're under a close eye.... You have to be ethical... [and] professional, because... you never know [who] is watching." Professionally, Mr. Mills believes it is important to be

involved in the community, but, he says, you have to be “very ethical when you’re doing it.”

For Mr. Mills, local, state, and national policies must be balanced against “what is best for kids” and what has been, and is, working for his school. If a policy or law is set or changed, he says, “you have to follow it.” He continues, “But... if it interferes with... things you have seen your district be successful with, I... think you have to keep” those things. According to Mr. Mills, “I don’t think you can let all of that... get in the way of who you really are,” as a school. In the end, Mr. Mills will follow the policies given to him and his school, but he will try to maintain the school’s practices and identity while doing so.

Student mental health, which he believes is the most influential force he faces as an administrator, is one place Mr. Mills knows changes need to be made. “Mental health... brings so many challenges to... elementary kids,” he says, including: negative “behaviors,” “depression,” “anxiety,” and “a simple lack of effort.” In response, the school brings in a mental health therapist twice each week to help their students.

Beyond student mental health, parent social media use is an influence on Mr. Mills and his school. Parents, he says, post comments and stories online without speaking to anyone at school, without verifying information, and without knowing all the facts. Then, their peers respond. These interactions negatively influence the positive climate and culture of the school.

Themes and Summary

Two themes emerged throughout the interview with Mr. Mills and they motivated him as he led, managed, and improved his school. The first was to build positive

relationships with his students and staff. Those relationships, and building those relationships, held a strong place in Mr. Mills's decision-making processes. The second was to "do what's best for kids." This idea of "doing what's best for kids" seemed to factor into most of his decisions.

Outside of building positive relationships with students and staff and "doing what's best" for students, the most influential factor in Mr. Mills's work seemed to be the school's adoption of PBIS. PBIS is designed to encourage and reward positive choices and actions. For Mr. Mills and his desire to build positive relationships, this system was an ideal fit. The school's PBIS program also fit well with the school's CC P.R.I.D.E initiative, which was a key component of Mr. Mills's messaging and fueled the school's behavior-reward system.

When asked about the mission statement, Mr. Mills's response was, "I can look it up." He continued, "It's too long for me to remember." When asked how he knew if they have achieved their mission or how his choices and actions could lead to achievement of the mission, Mr. Mills repeatedly responded "I don't know." He mentioned evidence collected from surveys of the community, staff, and students, and data from assessments. He mentioned the consideration of the mission as a part of the school improvement process after being asked about a connection between the mission and school improvement. Mr. Mills referred to a number of components he thought were a part of the mission statement, like: "relationships," "lifelong learners," "student achievement," and "providing a positive school environment." "Lifelong learners" was the only component which was close to the actual language of the mission statement. The mission statement was not part of Mr. Mills's decision-making processes.

The mission statement was included in the student handbook, and was referred to in the staff handbook. It was not used in any other documents provided for the study. The mission was not observed anywhere in the school during the site observation following the interview. CC P.R.I.D.E. signs and language, however, could be found in Mr. Mills's office, in classrooms, in hallways, and throughout the rest of the school. CC P.R.I.D.E. had a strong presence, and was a driving force at Calvin Coolidge Elementary School.

Mr. Mills believed there was significant overlap between his vision for education and the school's mission. He believed his work to build positive relationships with students and staff is part of the mission. He believed providing a positive school environment is part of the mission, and through PBIS, he believed they are accomplishing this goal. All these things, he believed, are part of doing "what's best for kids." As none of these are components of the school's mission, it is clear Mr. Mills did not actively consider the mission as he performed his duties leading, managing, and improving the school.

Case Study #11 - Mr. Russ Campbell, Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School

Mr. Russ Campbell is the principal and activities director at Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School. He says he waited to enter the administrative ranks until he had taught for ten years, so he would be able to better relate to teachers.

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Mr. Campbell's vision for teaching and learning is to make learning progressive, sustainable, and relatable. This vision evolved as he advanced from teacher to principal. As a teacher, he worried about the students he taught. As principal, he worries about all students, from the lowest-achieving to the highest-achieving. He worries about creating

engaging educational experiences that will capture the learners' attention. He worries about making students better people.

Mr. Campbell's goal in education is to prepare students to be productive after graduation, which he cannot do alone. To accomplish this, he provides teachers with the tools, training, and support they will need to "move our kids forward." This type of educational process is continually evolving, and Mr. Campbell believes he has empowered his teachers to make the necessary changes to encourage student growth.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Building relationships is difficult, according to Mr. Campbell, because establishing lines between his multiple roles is a delicate process. It is difficult, "especially in a small community," he says, because the lines between being a dad, a neighbor, and an administrator "get blurred." This blurring makes relationships difficult for people to process. At school, Mr. Campbell says, each new school year is an opportunity to build relationships, to make changes, and to get things right. The biggest challenge to maintaining relationships as an administrator, he says, is making tough decisions, because they strain relationships. After making tough decisions, Mr. Campbell says he spends time healing damaged relationships.

Even though the community is involved with the school, Mr. Campbell says they are generally quiet about the school, "but the moment something goes sideways... the sky is falling." He believes parent involvement has changed due to societal changes. Students with split families, with parents who work two jobs, or with single parents deal with different situations than students from households with two parents or parents who are not together but get along. In addition to these challenges, Mr. Campbell believes

parental support in the educational process diminishes as students get older, because they think “my kid can take care of their business.” When students get in trouble, though, parents become involved.

Mr. Campbell believes people appreciate a principal who provides a sense of knowing “how it is,” even if they do not like what they hear. When dealing with issues, Mr. Campbell ensures all parties have a voice and are heard, but he strives to find “the truth in the middle.” He does not pick sides in conflict, nor does he focus on what is best for him. He focuses on “us,” and doing what is best for the child, the parent, and the school.

Mr. Campbell, along with the other administrators in the district, communicates with students, staff, families, and the community through his monthly newsletter and a blog on the school’s website to share information about events and happenings at the school. He enjoys interacting with school families and community members at school and community events, where he shares positive information about the school with people, which he hopes they will share with others.

Mr. Campbell is not a strong proponent of using social media because he feels students and adults “engage too much” and “inappropriately,” though he does use Twitter. Mr. Campbell models appropriate engagement at school by using social media and technology in “the right manner.”

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

School improvement at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools is a continuous, district-wide effort, though Mr. Campbell’s school has its own goal. Over the course of the last two improvement cycles, they have focused on academic improvement, with vocabulary

improvement serving as the last cycle's goal. The school improvement team and staff chose improving technical writing across the curriculum as the next school improvement goal, because it was a logical step following vocabulary.

The school improvement goal is set through a series of steps, with ever-increasing involvement from staff members. The school improvement committee is composed of ten teachers, three administrators, and the curriculum coordinator. With the help of an ESU representative, this team studies standardized and in-class assessment data and climate data, and brainstorms improvement goal ideas that can be incorporated in all curricular areas. Once the committee feels they have a strong idea for an improvement goal, they present it to the staff, who receives and reviews the data, and is asked, "Where do you... want to go with this? We have an idea... but what are your thoughts?" This allows everyone to have a voice in the process as they develop the school improvement goal.

Calvin Coolidge Public Schools uses staff meetings and in-service days to provide the training and support teachers need to achieve the school improvement goal. They hold staff meetings twice a month for professional development to discuss data, their instructional model, their improvement goal, and other time-sensitive issues. They hold full-day in-service meetings at the beginning of both semesters to have an open dialogue about progress and challenges and to provide teacher support.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Mr. Campbell was an integral part of the curricular development and revision process, until the addition of the curriculum coordinator. His new role is to provide his vision for curriculum and provide guidance and direction for achieving this vision. His

curricular vision is to stretch students, pushing them to learn at higher levels and to be productive after graduation.

To build this curriculum, Mr. Campbell and the curriculum coordinator review data and gather teacher input. Together, they consider the school's goals, student growth data, state standards, and the overall rigor of the curriculum. They review lesson plans, observation notes, and evaluation reports. At the beginning of the year, Mr. Campbell meets with each curricular area's teachers to discuss plans, goals, and expectations for the year. Then, later in the year, they gather input from teachers to determine if they achieved their curricular goals. Based on this collected information, Mr. Campbell and the curriculum coordinator, in conjunction with the teachers, begin the process of considering adjustments, additions, or deletions from the curriculum and course offerings.

To determine if the curriculum meets the school's goals, they consider the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction. Mr. Campbell determines if effective instructional practices are being used through teacher observations and conversations as well as conversations with students. He asks students, "What's going on in class? How's it going? Are there places you're struggling? Can you tell me why?" This way, he is able to understand students' perspective. Then, to determine if the taught curriculum was effective, he looks at student assessment data, specifically for consistent student growth. If there are inconsistencies or regression, he begins conversations to understand if they are caused by a gap in the curriculum.

Mr. Campbell considers student-participation levels and the long-term viability and sustainability of programs offered to determine the effectiveness of non-curricular programs and offerings. According to Mr. Campbell, he is trying to find the right balance

between academics and activities and opportunities. This “right mix” will provide opportunities to increase engagement and student growth and help students grow.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Mr. Campbell’s biggest expectation for teachers is to make decisions which are “right for kids.” He hopes they have the confidence to make those decisions, and wants teachers to know they can come to him for advice or help if they need it. Teachers do not have the power to make financial decisions; they need to bring those to Mr. Campbell. When teachers try new techniques or strategies, Mr. Campbell wants them to inform him of their successes. If their attempts are successful, he asks them to share with their peers. He encourages the sharing of good ideas and techniques at staff meetings by asking, “What are you doing well?” Then, he guides the conversation to help others understand how they can try a similar approach.

Calvin Coolidge Public Schools does not have an established recruiting and hiring protocol or process. According to Mr. Campbell, they struggle to find teachers in high-need areas, because “rural education opportunities are high, but supply is low.” Each interview is designed to reveal an applicant’s background and strengths.

Mr. Campbell is a “firm believer” in professional growth and development. He asks his teachers to set individual curricular or instructional goals each year and encourages them to become better educational leaders. Most individual professional development opportunities for teachers are from outside agencies. If a teacher sees a training session offered at an ESU they believe will help them become a better teacher or leader, he encourages them to go. At school, Mr. Campbell offers interested teachers the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes and provides the opportunity to

perform peer observations.

According to Mr. Campbell, the administrative team focuses on “what’s best for students” when planning whole-staff professional development. Through this lens, they study the school improvement goal to determine the skills and understandings students need, and then they develop staff training ideas for teaching them. They compile this list of needs and ideas, including previous training they need to revisit, to begin planning whole-staff professional development.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Mr. Campbell says he focuses on doing what is best for students and the school as he manages the operations and systems of his school. He develops systems to be progressive, viable, and sustainable. Sustainability, in this case, refers to working within his budget, other allocated resources, and the directives and expectations he has been given. He then uses those systems to guide his actions.

Mr. Campbell’s resources are allocated by the superintendent, with priorities and directives attached to them. It is at Mr. Campbell’s discretion to determine how to meet and achieve those priorities and directives. Part of his resource management approach, he says, is to avoid spending money on top-of-the-line items, or on “all the bells and whistles.” His goal is to provide his students and staff with functional and up-to-date equipment resulting in an effective educational environment and experience.

When considering the school’s site, facility, and services, Mr. Campbell’s highest priority is staff, student, and public safety. He believes an updated and modern building keeps people safe and positively affects the school’s climate. His concerted efforts to put video cameras in place, to replace doors and flooring, and to regularly paint, have led

visitors to ask Mr. Campbell if the building, more than 50-years-old, is new.

The administrative team regularly discusses the school's expectations, rules, practices, and policies to determine what is working and what is not, and if their current rules and policies are best for the students and staff. As they consider possible changes to rules and policies, they consult their school lawyers and the Board of Education. When changes are made, Mr. Campbell communicates them to students, staff, parents, and the community. Then, he says, it is his job to observe and enforce the school's rules and policies.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Mr. Campbell describes Calvin Coolidge Public Schools as full of rich tradition. The centerpiece of the culture, however, is a desire "to put out the best product possible," and, he says, "to be the best at everything." This culture, according to Mr. Campbell has "always been." Even though the culture is long standing, not everyone agrees on how things should be done and some people in the community struggle with changes in practice that have occurred over the years. What the parents and community want most, according to Mr. Campbell, is for the school to prepare students for life after graduation. As long as this is happening, they will support the changes made over time.

Because the school's culture is built on being the best, celebrations are important at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools. Mr. Campbell focuses celebrations on the success of teams and individuals, using them to involve, inspire, and motivate students to perform at their highest levels. If a student does not participate in an activity in the upcoming season, Mr. Campbell encourages them to support their peers. His hope is to get everyone involved, so they feel a part of the school's success. This inspires growth and

development, and, according to Mr. Campbell, can lead to more success.

Mr. Campbell believes in consistency spurred by veteran teachers sharing their practices with new teachers. At the same time, new teachers are empowered to implement practices they believe are important. This infusion of innovation then leads to progress, change, and an evolution of teaching practices in the school. Mr. Campbell says this same process exists in the community: When new people move in, they embrace the school, but they also bring their experiences with them, which can lead to an evolution of community practices.

The community, parents, staff, and students, are surveyed by the administrative team at Calvin Coolidge Public Schools to assess the culture and climate of the school. Once the responses have been received, they are considered as a whole. Because people in his community do not always respond to surveys when things are going well, using survey data to initiate change is a challenge. To continue moving forward, Mr. Campbell seeks a balance between the responses and current practices.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Mr. Campbell believes it is his responsibility as the principal to ensure his students are safe and learning, to lead a progressive school, and to be compassionate while making tough decisions. A principal, according to Mr. Campbell, needs to approach rules and policies consistently. “The moment you start wavering from that,” he says, “it’s going to come back to you. If not in the near future... in years,” because, “they remember in a small community.” While they may remember, they do not necessarily understand the differences between situations, he says, which emphasizes the importance

of following policy and finding the best outcome for the school and the student in each situation.

It is important to Mr. Campbell to present himself in a good light. To do so, he greets community members at activities. He tries to make them feel comfortable and to help them understand they are important to him. Once they know their importance to him, Mr. Campbell believes they will be comfortable approaching him with questions or concerns. He promises stakeholders he will answer their questions and address their concerns as soon as he can.

According to Mr. Campbell, ethical practice centers on meeting and following expectations, which are set by state and local policy. Working to meet those expectations is his professional and ethical responsibility, he says. When there are changes in policy or expectations, Mr. Campbell believes it is his responsibility to “manage what you can manage and adapt what you have to” in order to meet those expectations.

Influence, to Mr. Campbell, is directly related to the immediacy of feedback. Teachers and students, he believes, are the most influential members of the school community because of their “immediate” feedback. Students, along with verbal or written feedback, exert their influence through their involvement in class, activities, and school in general. Mr. Campbell believes the Board of Education is an influential force because of their ability to dictate, direct, support, or question the efforts of the school. The impact of the community and parents is diminished by their passivity when things are going well. Their influence, he says, changes dramatically when things “go sideways.” Because things generally go well, complacency could become a concern, but, he says, it is not.

Themes and Summary

Mr. Campbell's interview provided two prevalent themes in his work: providing a progressive, sustainable, and relatable education; and doing what is right or best for students. Mr. Campbell was an educational manager focused on providing a progressive, sustainable, and relatable education that prepares students to be productive after graduation. This type of education, Mr. Campbell believed, must be responsive to all student needs and must provide a variety of opportunities. Providing a variety of opportunities creates challenges, though. It can lead to over-extension of resources, both financial and personnel. Because of this, he was continually balancing opportunities versus opportunity cost to find the "right mix" between the two.

Mr. Campbell empowered his staff to help him provide a progressive, sustainable, and relatable education. Staff members were encouraged to try new things and share the results. They were invited to be a part of decision-making processes. Their focus, as he said repeatedly, was on doing what is "right" or "best" for students. With this shared understanding, he and his staff worked to deliver an education that prepares students to be productive after graduation. Under Mr. Campbell's leadership and management, Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School was continually evolving.

When asked about the mission, Mr. Campbell could not state it. When asked about achieving the mission, he referred to continuous learners and his belief they are promoting continuous learning. Mr. Campbell said he asked himself "on a daily basis" if they are adequately preparing students to lead productive lives after high school.

The mission statement was posted in his office, in the hallways, and in classrooms. It was included in the student handbook, and it was discussed as part of the

school improvement process. It did not, however, appear to be a conscious part of Mr. Campbell's daily decision-making process.

Mr. Campbell's primary focus when leading, managing, and improving the school was to do what is "best" and "right" for students through a sustainable and relatable progressive education. What is "best" and "right" for students, according to Mr. Campbell's responses, was preparing them to be productive after graduation and helping them to become better people. His decision-making process and the factors he considered as he performed his duties as principal are more closely tied to his vision for teaching and learning than they are the school's mission.

When asked specifically about the mission, Mr. Campbell acknowledged it should drive the actions taken by a principal. He identified the importance of "knowing it and doing it." He did not, however, know it when asked. He did know the factors driving him as principal at Calvin Coolidge Jr.-Sr. High School: progressivism, sustainability, viability, and a desire to prepare every student to be productive after graduation. He wanted to see consistent improvement in student performance, and he put practices in place to encourage this growth.

Case Study #12 - Ms. Michelle Richards, James Madison Public Schools

Ms. Michelle Richards is the Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade (PK-12) principal at James Madison Public Schools. She applied for and accepted the position at James Madison Public Schools, a lower performing school, because she believed she "could help."

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

Ms. Richards's vision for teaching and learning is one of collaboration. As a

collaborative administrator, she sees herself as a teacher, leader, and facilitator working with learners, teachers, and parents. Collaboration is part of Ms. Richards's process to establish and develop relationships. According to her, relationships are essential to the school's success and to student growth.

Ms. Richards's goal is to focus the school on its students and to see students grow. To do this, she believes the students, teachers, and parents all need to work together. Ms. Richards's goal of student growth is supported by individual student and classroom goals based on various types of data: assessment, attendance, and participation data; survey results; and AQuESTT data and results. Students have individual data portfolios they use to track their own data and growth. Student-led conferences in Kindergarten through grade six provide students with the opportunity to discuss their growth with their parents and teachers.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Ms. Richards has strong relationships with students and staff and has an open door for communication and collaboration. She believes strong, collaborative relationships are built by understanding and appreciating one another. A second important part of her relationships is living in the truth. When she first came to James Madison, it was a low-performing school. She spoke with students and staff honestly and openly about living in this truth, which included discussing what it means to be a low-performing school and what they could do about it. She provided encouragement to her students and staff, and she began to build a team of teachers and students who understood the truth of their school. They were a low-performing school, but they did not have to be, and it was in each of their power to change that truth. Today, if someone comes to James

Madison Public School, they are expected to rise to the standards that have been set as a result of these frank conversations.

The school's mission statement is a significant part of the relationships Ms. Richards has built within the school and with the community. The mission statement is recited by student leaders every day before the Pledge of Allegiance. Ms. Richards and her teachers discuss, with one another and with students, the mission statement's meaning and how they can achieve it. These conversations and the daily recital of the mission statement reinforce the relationship between students, teachers, and the school, reminding them they are all part of the same team.

James Madison is a small community, and parents can only do and be at so much. Parents attend parent-teacher conferences at a high rate, with 100% participation at the elementary level and between 75 and 80% participation at the junior high and high school levels. Ms. Richards has seen conference participation increase as parent and student investment in the student's learning increases. Parents come to athletic events and co-curricular activities, but attendance is lower at academic activities. Ms. Richards believes increasing student participation is the key to increasing parental attendance. If a student is participating, parents will show up, she says, "because they want to be proud. They want to be excited." By reinstating valued traditions that had fallen by the wayside, Ms. Richards generated student, parent, and community excitement and engagement.

The overriding message Ms. Richards communicates with her community, staff, students, and parents is, "Kids are first." She asks students, "How can we help you?" The responses to this question helps Ms. Richards understand students' wants and needs, and it helps students understand that the school, their parents, and the community are invested

in their futures.

Ms. Richards prefers to communicate through one-to-one conversations, but she is comfortable speaking with large and small groups, classes, and clubs. She regularly communicates with parents through the Remind app, and will use the school's computer management and messaging system to send messages to students. She rarely uses social media because she does not want to engage with comments or questions online. If a stakeholder has a question or would like to speak with her, she prefers they call her, or make an appointment to visit with her.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

Ms. Richards describes the school improvement process as “bumpy.” When she first started, the process was “good” with collaboration between the school, community, and parents. Then, the superintendent who led the process died. The process came to a halt when the next superintendent was hired. Now, with the third superintendent of Ms. Richards’s tenure, they are working to restore the previous process. She believes a district needs stability in its administrative and teacher leadership to keep this complex process moving forward. With her and her superintendent’s upcoming retirements, she says continued school improvement progress will depend on the teachers.

According to Ms. Richards, they are “behind” in their improvement progress, especially in curriculum. At this point, Ms. Richards feels they need to review their goals, reestablish previous goals and establish new goals. They are bringing in an ESU consultant to lead the curriculum development process. Through data study, the team will determine student weaknesses and then develop interventions for students at all performance levels. This data study will incorporate multiple forms of data, including

assessment, attendance, participation, and climate and culture survey data. They will communicate the results of this ongoing data study, along with goals and progress, with parents and the community at meetings, on the school website, and in the local newspaper.

Ms. Richards monitors their improvement progress over time through a series of plans and goals. They developed a five-year plan during year one of the school improvement process. Ms. Richards creates her own one-year plans based on the school's five-year plan, and she tracks daily and monthly progress toward achieving improvement goals.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Ms. Richards is in charge of instruction and curriculum and the curriculum review and adoption process, a process she says is slow. Their goal is to study until they have staff-wide consensus on their move forward, and then make a change. As part of their study, they visit schools using the textbook or curriculum to learn its strengths and weaknesses and if they recommend it. They have professional conversations about student needs. Ms. Richards does not believe in top-down directives, nor does she believe in voting because, she says, in a vote there are winners and losers. A decision has to come from the team, and it has to be consensus. So, they work toward an agreement, no matter how long it takes.

Ms. Richards believes leaders of small schools must be creative and innovative when implementing and improving instructional techniques. She utilizes professional development in the forms of book study, training, and professional goals. Their current school-wide professional goal is to improve student engagement. They recently

completed a staff-wide book study which teachers used to set individual professional goals. An ESU instructional coach works with teachers to improve instructional effectiveness, student engagement, and classroom management. Ms. Richards conducts student-engagement focused walk-through observations. These walk-throughs and subsequent conversations lead to improved instruction. Curricular and instructional effectiveness is determined through data study. Though standardized assessments are just a snapshot, they provide valuable information for their continual process of data study at the student, grade, and school levels.

Non-curricular programs at James Madison Public Schools are viewed as an extension of the classroom. Ms. Richards trusts her sponsors and respects their expertise. To evaluate the programs, she talks to students and attends their events. If the students' skills are weak, or if they are underperforming, she speaks with the sponsor and they work together to make improvements. According to Ms. Richards, this collaboration is "informal, yet formal." The value of these programs, she says, is clear when students graduate and go to college or pursue a career based on the programs or experiences offered by the school.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

According to Ms. Richards, teachers are expected to "focus on kids, not content." She expects teachers to know their content area and to make it relevant and interesting. She also expects teachers to teach the students first, then the content. Additionally, Ms. Richards expects collaboration between team members, who know every voice will be heard and taken into account. She expects staff members to understand and follow the code of ethics, established protocols, staff handbooks, and the chain of command.

Teachers are expected to hold students accountable for following the handbook and the code of ethics. Ms. Richards knows that communication is key to establishing these expectations. She believes her approach of telling the truth and meaning what she says helps her communicate and collaborate with her staff.

The superintendent is responsible for the hiring and recruitment of staff members. To recruit, they will advertise locally and across the state in newspapers, online, and at colleges. They attend college fairs and will hire on the spot if they meet a good candidate. Ms. Richards works with new teachers to help them understand the district's instructional model, expectations, and their standards, curriculum, and assessments. Each new teacher is provided a mentor who serves as a guide and coach. New teachers meet with other teachers in weekly PLC meetings.

Professional development is based on the district's goals, expectations, vision and mission. Ms. Richards repeats previous book studies and effective training sessions to train new teachers on initiatives which are part of district expectations, and to refresh veteran teachers' memories. Individual professional goals are implemented as part of whole-staff professional development, and she meets with staff members to review the impact of working to achieve their individual goals.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

The superintendent is responsible for managing the buildings and grounds, transportation, and custodial staff. Ms. Richards's primary role is to serve as the instructional leader for the district, and she is responsible for providing high-quality instruction and student services. Ms. Richards collaborates through data-informed conversations with team members who understand student needs. Ms. Richards has the

autonomy to make changes or decisions based on student needs, but she always communicates with the superintendent before making those changes.

When considering changes to practice, policy, rules or expectations, Ms. Richards relies on conversation and collaboration. Prior to suggesting changes, she speaks with appropriate staff members, students, parents, and community members. She considers their input in the decision-making process and believes hearing the voices of the community when considering changes is important. Suggested changes are brought to the Board of Education for approval. They, in turn, seek input from administrators, staff members, and other stakeholders if they have questions or concerns.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

The culture at James Madison Public Schools is not what Ms. Richards would like it to be, but recognizes the culture for what it is: passive. Rodeo is important to students, families and the community, but this importance creates challenges for the school, beginning with chronic absenteeism. Because of their absenteeism, it is hard to keep students motivated, focused, and moving forward. While students, and their families, may not be motivated to adopt the school's priorities, or complete needed tasks on time, they show up for dances and games.

When Ms. Richards arrived, the school had just been named a lower achieving school. As the new principal, she faced hostility and anger; the staff wanted to know what kind of leader she would be and what she was going to do. Ms. Richards asked them to recognize the truth and to live in the truth: the school was low-achieving. She began collaborating with teachers, parents, and students, which helped to improve relationships, engagement, and test scores almost immediately.

Celebrations of student success and achievement are made public by recognizing students in the newspaper, on the school's bulletin boards, at assemblies and pep rallies, and in the daily announcements. They recognize unique and noteworthy accomplishments, like earning a place on the honor roll, or state and national honors. Ms. Richards says "We celebrate who we are and we don't try to be something we aren't."

Ms. Richards recognizes students as the center of the school's culture, but she knows the focus of the community is agriculture. Most of the people and families in the community are ag people and ag families, as are most of the students. In response, she builds programs and opportunities to support her students and their agriculturally-centered futures.

Ms. Richards uses simple, one-page surveys to assess the culture. Simple surveys are most effective, she believes, because students, parents, and staff will complete them. These surveys provide valuable feedback to help improve the school's challenging culture.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Ms. Richards sees herself as a collaborator, facilitator, coach, teacher, and role model. An important part of these roles is setting and meeting expectations. She trains staff and students on expectations, which are "the truth" in which they live. Ms. Richards believes, "If you live in the truth, you have to follow the truth." When someone fails to meet expectations, she follows through and issues consequences. She advises, "Do the right thing... even when it's... uncomfortable."

Ms. Richards believes truth, honesty, loyalty, and respect form the foundation for ethical practice. It is important to Ms. Richards to honor and respect the expectations

placed on her and the school. She believes it is important to honor, respect, and support the community, the Board of Education, the superintendent, her staff, her students and their parents.

“We live in a world of change,” Ms. Richards says, “and we have to be prepared for change.” Whether it originates at the national, state, or local level, she hopes and believes change aligns with ethical practice. To understand and prepare for upcoming changes, Ms. Richards regularly communicates with regional and state leaders, and she diligently reads leadership articles. She believes one can successfully navigate change through good communication. Ms. Richards battles “miscommunication and... gossip” in her school and community by guiding others to share positive messages about the school and its students.

Themes and Summary

Two themes emerged throughout Ms. Richards interview to describe her approach to leading, managing, and improving a school: goal-driven collaboration and truth. When she arrived at James Madison Public Schools, one of her first actions was to identify, and help the students and staff acknowledge, a specific truth: they were a low-achieving school. Ms. Richards believed this truth could change if they worked together. This initial conversation shed light on two of the most important components to Ms. Richards’s leadership style: collaboration and goal setting.

As a child, Ms. Richards was taught by her father to set goals, achieve them, and set new goals. As an adult, she embraced this mindset and recognized she cannot accomplish school goals by herself. She needs partners; she needs to collaborate. Her

collaborative efforts were focused on students: ensuring they are the focus of the school's efforts and putting them in position to be successful.

When asked about the mission statement, Ms. Richards recited the mission without hesitation. She felt they were able to determine the school's progress toward achieving the mission through data study and conversation. Ms. Richards worked to instill the value of the mission in new and veteran staff members through a yearly review of the mission, its meaning, and its impact.

While the mission statement was not posted throughout the building, it was part of each student's and staff member's day. It was said as part of the daily announcements before the Pledge of Allegiance. It was included in the student and faculty handbooks, included as part of the most recent school improvement materials, and mentioned and displayed as part of their curriculum development workshops and action plan.

There were three components to the James Madison Public Schools mission statement: partnering with parents and the community, providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum, and empowering students. Throughout the interview, Ms. Richards referred to these three components repeatedly. She referred to rigor and relevance when discussing the curriculum and instruction, assessments, and professional development. She mentioned empowering students and preparing them for their futures through the school's programs and opportunities. From her standpoint, a genuine partnership existed between the school, the parents, the community, and the students.

Ms. Richards believed it is important for everyone in the school to know and communicate the mission effectively, because it is about students and "their greater achievement in life." She wanted all students to achieve at "the highest level... they

possibly can." When she considered the goals and expectations placed on them by national, state, and local priorities and policies, she worked to implement and achieve them, because she believed they connect directly to the school's mission.

The mission was clearly an important part of Ms. Richards's work at James Madison Public Schools. It drove Ms. Richards and the processes for which she was responsible.

Cross-Case Analysis

In the second layer of analysis, patterns and themes were again uncovered through the coding process. The patterns and themes that emerged from this process helped to develop an understanding of the findings across cases. The cross-case analysis is an essential part of a multicase study such as this because the goal of a multicase study is to produce analytic generalizations supported by data. This study's generalizations are based on the principals' general practice and their use of the district's mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools.

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

These principals' visions for teaching and learning generally focused on instructional leadership, staff leadership, culture for learning, and developing relationships. Instructional leadership was the most comprehensive. Of those visions focused on instructional leadership, there were five areas addressed: to provide and protect their curriculum; to prepare students to be successful in school and in the future; to develop the whole child by focusing on character and academic development; to measure student and school success through student growth and achievement; and to study, understand, and use data as part of the instructional and educational processes.

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

Eight of the principals included good, strong, positive, or trusting as descriptors of their relationships, or say their relationships were built on honesty, truth, or a willingness to communicate and collaborate. Four principals described their parents and community members as very supportive or highly involved. They believed these levels of support and participation were caused by their positive relationships with their students' parents and community members.

Principal's generally described their communications as positive, supportive, and celebratory messages to staff, students, parents, and the community, and typically include news, general information, and specific information about recent and upcoming activities and events.

The methods of communication these principals use change depending on the audience, including individual conversations and communication, student assemblies, and staff meetings. The most commonly used tool for mass communication was social media. These principals generally believe social media helps them connect the school, parents, and community by generating positive conversations about school and student success. Three principals in the study do not, or rarely, use social media, because they want to maintain consistent communication methods and want to avoid negative online comments or suggestions.

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

All districts are involved in the school improvement process. Principals generally describe the school improvement process as a structured, data-driven, problem-solving process, designed to choose and implement strategies to meet their goals. In the four

smaller districts, this was a district-wide process. In the two larger districts, principals were more focused on their building-level efforts. School improvement and leadership teams were generally composed of the principal and a number of teachers, including a special education teacher. Guidance counselors and curriculum directors were frequently included. In the smaller districts, this was a district team and usually includes the superintendent and an ESU representative.

Principals generally maintain forward school improvement progress by deliberately focusing on achieving their goals. They tended to develop yearly plans and goals which include professional development and progress monitoring and were based on the five-year school improvement plan. Eleven of the principals held regular meetings with the school improvement team and staff members to share student progress and discuss the next steps in the school improvement process.

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

Principals, in general, were responsible for coordinating and facilitating curriculum adoption and alignment, ensuring teachers are teaching the adopted curriculum with fidelity, and facilitating achievement progress monitoring. Collectively, they look for a research-based, standards- and goal-aligned curriculum to prepare students for the next step in their educational process.

The seven principals who verify alignment between school goals and the curriculum monitor student growth and development through student achievement data checks. Curricular and instructional effectiveness was typically determined through progress monitoring, lesson-plan checks, and the evaluation process.

Informal reviews of student participation levels and student interest were the most common tools used to evaluate non-curricular programs. For these informal reviews, principals relied on: conversations with teachers, coaches, and sponsors; student and parent feedback from conversations and surveys; and personal observations.

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

Principals generally expected their teachers to be professional, but this had different meanings for each principal. Principals typically communicated these expectations at staff meetings, in formal and informal conversations, and through professional development and training.

The hiring process typically included anywhere from two to four members. In most of the districts, the team consists of the principal, at least one other administrator (most commonly the superintendent), and a staff member. Two interview teams were described as including a guidance counselor or additional staff members. One principal indicated they were not part of the hiring process.

Seven of the principals utilized mentoring programs to develop new staff members. Participants from the two larger districts used a two-year program for all new and new-to-the-district teachers. Seven principals said they rely on positive relationships or a school culture built on respecting and supporting teachers in order to retain staff members.

Yearly staff professional development and in-service plans were typically developed at the building level, based on student performance and teacher needs, and informed by the district's vision for professional development. In the five cases where professional development and in-service plans were developed at the district level, they

were the result of collaborative work between multiple levels of administration or the principal was the district principal.

Research Question #6: Systems Management

Most of the principals utilize goal-driven, data-informed systems designed to solve problems and achieve goals in their schools. Principals consider a number of factors when allocating their financial, material, and human resources, and their time. Seven participants specifically focused on meeting student, staff, and school needs. Three principals reported not having control of their own budget. Participating principals expressed three primary concerns when considering the site, facilities, equipment, and services their school offers: the appearance of their building and grounds; the safety of their staff, students, and the public; and the effective and efficient operations of their equipment and services.

When reviewing and discussing expectations, six of the principals identified a general focus on: enforcing district policy; creating and maintaining a supportive learning environment; providing students with positive opportunities and experiences; or enhancing the safety, security, and social-emotional well-being of students. Five principals typically engage in problem-solving processes to evaluate the effectiveness of the rules and policies in place; to identify the factors causing issues, problems, or ineffectiveness; and to determine areas and methods for improvement.

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

Cultures were generally described as positive with good relationships between staff and students. The one principal who did not describe their culture in positive

described their culture as passive. The principal's view of the culture was generally tied to their vision for teaching and learning.

Principals typically celebrated with their students, staff, and school to involve, inspire, and motivate students to perform at their highest levels and to create a community of support and encouragement for students. Two principals preferred to limit celebrations, in order to motivate students by keeping them "hungry."

The most important parts of their school culture, according to these principals, can be categorized as people, actions, and/or the environment. Nine principals identified the people of the school as the most important part of the culture, six identified actions, and one identified the environment. Principals may utilize a variety of tools to evaluate their school's culture. Two of the participants do not, or only rarely, evaluate the school culture. When they do evaluate their school culture, seven principals indicated they relied on informal measures such as conversation and observation.

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

Six of the principals described themselves as the primary leader and manager of their building. Two identified themselves as school parents.

Seven principals generally believed the key elements to being an ethical leader were some combination of being honest and trustworthy; being consistent, disciplined, and practical; or being transparent and equitable. To be an ethical leader, seven principals felt they must be aware of and follow local, state, and federal expectations, rules, and laws. When aligning ethical practice with the local, state, and national policies they are asked to manage, nine of the participating principals echoed the same idea: They do what needs to be done because it is their responsibility.

The most commonly identified forces these principals manage were legislators and the legislation they pass, board members and the board policies they pass, parents, public perception, and staff. Eleven of the principals identified one or a combination of these forces. Four principals identified conversation and education as their most effective tools for managing these external and internal forces.

Themes

As these principals lead, manage, and improve their schools, they rely on their visions for teaching and learning, their personal philosophies, or their belief in “doing what’s best for kids.” The eight principals who relied on their visions for teaching and learning were able to clearly communicate their visions. They choose staff members and build relationships to help them achieve their visions. Those visions influence principals’ decision-making and problem-solving. These eight principals relied on their personal philosophies to lead and manage their school and used their philosophy to frame their decision-making processes; determine how and when to make changes; and set the tone for and supported or undermined relationships between staff, students, parents, and community members. While visions for teaching and learning and personal philosophies varied by principal, one common theme expressed by principals as they led, managed, and improved their school was “doing what’s best for kids.” It was a powerful force in the decision-making process for five principals. One principal believed achieving his vision for teaching and learning was what was “best” for his students.

The district mission statement was stated as part of each school’s student handbook. This was the only common usage among participants. The only other consistent (four principals in three of the districts) inclusion of the district mission

statement was in the previous school improvement cycle's materials. Two of the districts developed, or were developing, new mission statements as part of their current school improvement process. The district mission statement was regularly posted throughout the building (eight principals) in areas such as the front office, the main lobby, and commons areas. These are the most public areas of the school, where guests to the school may see them. The mission statement was not commonly posted in hallways (five principals), the principal's office (two principals), or classrooms (three principals).

Of the twelve principals who participated in this study, only three knew their district's mission statement. Two more recalled part of the district's mission. Seven of the principals did not know, or could not state, their district's mission statement. Two principals said the mission was too long to remember. Two principals felt their district's mission statement were generic or unspecific. Three principals were not sure achieving the mission was possible or quantifiable. To know if they have achieved the school's mission, two principals said they study data from assessments and review feedback from staff, student, parent, and community member surveys.

Six of the principals have a school-related statement they rely upon, instead of the mission, to lead, manage, and improve their schools. Two principals, both from the same district, adopted building mission statements. One principal adopted an acronym for expected behaviors, which doubles as a school pride call to action. Three, all from the same school district, prefer the district's vision statement over the mission statement.

Three principals were aware of and utilize a mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools. The first was aware of and building on the district's mission, but, he says, it was not yet "ingrained" in the culture or in his or his staff's decision-

making processes. The mission factored into the relationships he built and the rules, expectations, policies, and procedures he developed for students and staff. He was not sure that achieving the mission was “quantifiable” and instead tried to determine if they were “doing what’s best” for students.

The second was driven by a mission and leads a mission-driven school, but it was not the district’s mission. He and his building adopted a building mission separate from the district’s mission. This principal was personally driven by, and had systems in place to achieve, the building mission. He dismissed the district’s mission as “the same as every single school district mission in the United States.”

The third principal was driven by the district’s mission statement, because it was about students and “their greater achievement in life.” She referred to the three components of their mission statement regularly throughout the interview, and she believed it was important for everyone in the school to know and communicate the mission effectively. This was why the mission was included in each student and staff member’s day as part of the daily announcements. The mission statement, its meaning, and its impact were reviewed yearly among students, staff, parents, and the community.

Summary

Chapter four introduced the twelve research participants from twelve schools in six districts. The major themes for each of the nine sub-questions were presented.

Chapter five presents a discussion of the findings of this study by answering the central research question and sub-questions, identifies limitations of this study, and offers recommendations for the target audiences and for future research.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Summary

This multicase study's purpose was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. In order to better understand how principals use their mission statements, twelve principals from public schools across Nebraska were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews, site observations, and examination of current artifacts.

A multicase study methodology was selected to develop a generalized understanding of the research question: How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission statement to lead, manage, and improve their schools? The desire to develop an understanding of principals, their decision-making processes, and their actions was an ideal fit for an instrumental multicase study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). This study was bounded by the role of the participant, the Nebraska public school principal. Individual cases were explored, focusing on the decisions made, actions taken, and artifacts observed and provided by principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools, specifically related to the school mission's role in the principal's decisions and actions. Upon completion of the within-case analysis, cross-case analysis was performed to explore and uncover any patterns and trends in the utilization of the school mission in the principal's decisions and actions as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. Throughout this study, the use of the descriptor "school" before mission implies that the school adopted the district's mission statement as their own. In a few instances in this study, an individual school building developed and adopted their own mission statement. In these cases, those mission statements are referred to as "building" mission statements.

Interview, site observation, and evidence analysis protocols were developed to explore each principal's utilization of their district's mission statement and to answer the research question. The following sub-questions were explored:

1. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's vision for teaching and learning?
2. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's development of relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?
3. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the school's continuous improvement process?
4. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?
5. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members?
6. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school?
7. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's efforts to create an effective school culture?
8. How does the mission of the school guide and inform the principal's interpretation and implementation of local, state, and national educational policies?
9. How does the principal know if the school has achieved its mission?

Early in the research process, a literature review was conducted to more fully understand the roles of principals in Nebraska's public schools; leadership, management,

and change; mission statements; and to more fully understand the connections between each of these elements. Missing from the current literature is a discussion of the connections between the mission statement and the actions of principals. Specifically missing was a discussion of the influence of mission statements on the practices of principals from across the state of Nebraska. This study is intended to begin this conversation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, site observations, and evidence analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an automated service and then line checked for accuracy. The interview transcript was then analyzed through a combination of first-cycle hand-coding measures and second-cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). As patterns and themes emerged, authentic answers to the research questions emerged, grounded in the participant's interview responses and the researcher's site observations and evidence analysis. Following the completion of within-case analysis, the analysis process continued with cross-case analysis using the first-cycle coding methods, followed by second-cycle coding to uncover generalizable findings.

Findings can be generalized because they are grounded, not in the individual cases, but in the cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018), and they can lead the researcher to “greater insight [into] the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions... posed at the outset of the study” (Yin, 2018, p. 38). Before discussing how these Nebraska public school principals utilize their school district’s mission statements as they lead, manage, and improve their schools, it is important to discuss the responsibilities of Nebraska public school principals; leadership, management, and change; and mission statements individually and in summary.

Findings

This study explored the practices of principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. It was not only about the practices of Nebraska public school principals, though, it was also about how they utilize their district's mission statement in these processes. The findings of this study, grounded in the cross-case analysis, are discussed below, thematically separated into leadership, management, and change; mission statement alignment with principals' responsibilities; and mission statement knowledge.

Leadership, Management, and Change

Though the words leadership and management are often used interchangeably (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014), the roles are significantly different. Kotter (2012) discusses leadership and management practices in terms of change. Leadership practices are those which build systems or transform old ones to achieve goals or purposes. Management practices are those which make systems work more efficiently and effectively. Each of the eight domains discussed with principals as part of this research contain elements and opportunities for leadership, management, and change.

Overwhelmingly, principals in this study relied upon management practices. Their belief in the strength of their systems and cultures led most principals in this study to believe incremental improvements were all they needed to continue improving their schools, systems, and student achievement. In the few cases where principals were unhappy, or dissatisfied, with the outcomes of a particular system or situation, they described their efforts to build or transform their current system to achieve different results.

Mission Statement Alignment with Principals' Responsibilities

The Nebraska Department of Education's *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (2017) divides typical principal responsibilities into eight domains. Those domains formed the foundation for the interview protocol and the subsequent discussion between participant and researcher. The eight domains are: vision for learning, development of relationships, continuous school improvement, instructional leadership, staff leadership, systems management, culture for learning, and professional ethics and advocacy.

Principals were asked to describe their vision for teaching and learning and how they established goals for their school. These principals' visions for teaching and learning generally focused on instructional leadership, staff leadership, culture for learning, and developing relationships. Most principals discussed their personal goals for the school when discussing their vision for teaching and learning. When asked about school goals, they began discussing the development of school improvement goals. Only one vision for teaching and learning was informed by the district's mission statement. Her vision was created, this researcher believes, through a natural alignment between the principal's personal beliefs and the district's mission. One principal's vision for teaching and learning was aligned with the building mission statement. His goal was to build a school capable of achieving that mission.

Principals were asked to describe their relationships with the school's students, staff, families, and community; family and community participation in the school; their communication processes; the message they share; and how they utilize social media. Eight of the principals included good, strong, positive, or trusting as descriptors of their

relationships, or said their relationships were built on honesty, truth, or a willingness to communicate and collaborate. Several principals described their parents and community members as very supportive or highly involved. They believed this support and participation was caused by their positive relationships with their students' parents and community members. Principal communications were generally positive, supportive, and celebratory messages which typically included news, general information, and specific information about recent and upcoming activities and events. The most commonly used tool for mass communication was social media. These principals generally believed social media helped them connect the school, parents, and community by generating positive conversations about school and student success. When discussing relationships, three of the principals referred to their mission. The first discussed his focus on the building mission as part of his regular communications with students, staff, parents, and community members. The second believed the district's mission led students to enjoy coming to school, which encouraged parents to come to activities and events. The third built the district's mission into part of every day and used it to help students remember they are all part of the same team.

Principals were asked to describe their school improvement process, how they selected goals, and how they kept the school improvement process focused and moving in the right direction. Principals generally described the school improvement process as a structured, data-driven, problem-solving process designed to choose and implement strategies to meet their goals. Principals generally maintained forward school improvement progress by developing yearly plans and goals, which were based on the five-year school improvement plan and included professional development and progress

monitoring, and by holding regular meetings with the school improvement team and staff members to share student progress and discuss the next steps in the school improvement process. One principal incorporated their building mission into their school improvement plan as one of their three school improvement goals.

When the discussion moved to instructional leadership, principals were asked to describe their role in the school's curriculum and how they ensured students were being taught and learning a curriculum that aligned with the school's goals. Then, they were asked how they ensured and assessed their school's instructional and curricular effectiveness and how they reviewed the school's non-curricular programs and opportunities. Generally, principals shared that they were responsible for coordinating and facilitating curriculum adoption and alignment, ensuring instructional fidelity to the adopted curriculum, and facilitating achievement progress monitoring. Collectively, they look for a research-based, standards- and goal-aligned curriculum. Progress monitoring, lesson-plan checks, and the evaluation process were typically used to verify alignment between school goals and the curriculum and to determine curricular and instructional effectiveness. Informal reviews of student participation levels and student interest; conversations with teachers, coaches, and sponsors; student and parent feedback from conversations and surveys; and personal observations were used to evaluate non-curricular programs. Two principals referred to their mission when discussing instructional leadership. The first principal's primary goal for curriculum and instruction was to prepare students to go to college. This was in direct alignment with his building's mission statement. The second principal referred to different components of the district's

mission when discussing the school's curriculum, instruction, programs, and opportunities.

As principals discussed their staff leadership, they shared their staff expectations, the processes they used to recruit and select high quality professional and support staff, their processes for developing and retaining staff members, and their processes for planning whole-staff professional development. They generally expected their teachers to be professional, but this had different meanings for each principal. Principals typically communicated these expectations at staff meetings, in formal and informal conversations, and through professional development and training. The hiring process typically involved a team of two to four members, including: the principal, at least one other administrator (most commonly the superintendent), and a staff member. Seven of the twelve principals utilized mentoring programs to develop new staff members. Principals generally relied on positive relationships and a school culture built on respecting and supporting teachers in order to retain staff members. Yearly staff professional development and in-service plans were typically based on student performance and teacher needs and informed by the district's vision for professional development. One principal in this study referred to elements of his building's mission statement when discussing staff professional development. Another principal specifically referred to the district's mission as part of her school's professional development planning process.

When discussing systems management, principals shared how they ensured the effectiveness of their operations and systems; the factors they considered when managing their resources; the factors they considered when managing their school site, facilities, services and equipment; and the factors they considered when discussing and reviewing

expectations, rules, policies, and procedures. Most of the principals utilized goal-driven, data-informed systems designed to solve problems and achieve their school's goals.

While these principals considered a number of factors when allocating their financial, material, and human resources, and their time, most focused on meeting student, staff, and school needs. Participating principals expressed three primary concerns when considering their school's site, facilities, equipment, and services: the appearance of their building and grounds; the safety of their staff, students, and the public; and the effective and efficient operations of their equipment and services. When reviewing and discussing expectations, rules, policies, and procedures, principals generally focused on: enforcing district policy; creating and maintaining a supportive learning environment; providing students with positive opportunities and experiences; and enhancing the safety, security, and social-emotional well-being of students. None of the principals specifically referred to their mission statement when discussing systems management, though one did identify his building mission as "a beacon" to guide systems management decisions when asked specifically about the mission's influence on systems management.

As the participants and researcher discussed the school's culture for learning, principals were asked to describe the school culture and how they framed the celebration of achievements and accolades, to identify the most important or valuable components of the school culture, and to share how they assess their school culture. Cultures were generally described as positive with good relationships between staff and students. Celebrations with their students and staff were intended to involve, inspire, and motivate students to perform at their highest levels and to create a community of support and encouragement for students. The principals identified people, actions, or the environment

as the most important parts of their school culture. Principals described a variety of tools they could use to evaluate their school's culture, but most of the participants did not, or only rarely, evaluated the school culture. When they did, principals tended to rely on informal measures such as conversation and observation. One principal referred to components of her school's mission when discussing the school's culture, but none specifically referred to the mission when discussing the school's culture.

To explore the influences on principals' professional ethics and advocacy, they were asked to discuss their role in the school; to describe the key elements of ethical practice and how they align them to the local, state, and national policies they are challenged to manage; and to identify the most influential forces they faced as they strove to achieve their vision for the school. Most of the principals described themselves as the primary leader and manager of their building. Principals generally believed the key elements to being an ethical leader were being honest and trustworthy; consistent, disciplined, and practical; and transparent and equitable. To be an ethical leader, most principals felt they must be aware of and follow local, state, and federal expectations, rules, and laws because it is their responsibility to do so. The most commonly identified forces these principals managed were legislators and legislation, board members and board policy, parents, public perception, and staff. Conversation and education were these principal's most effective tools for managing these external and internal forces. Most of the principals had not considered a relationship between their district's mission statement and their implementation of local, state, and national policies. One principal worked to implement and achieve the policies and their goals because she believed they directly connected to her school's mission.

In Table 3, the specific alignment of each principal's responsibilities with the district's mission statement is provided. Though this study was not intended to study building mission statements, where alignment of a principal's responsibilities and the building's mission statement were uncovered, this was noted.

Table 3*Mission Statement Alignment and Principals' Responsibilities*

	Aligned	Partially aligned	No evidence/ did not align	Comments
Vision for Teaching and Learning	1	1*	10	* Building mission statement
Developing Relationships	3*		9	* One was building mission statement
Continuous School Improvement	1*		11	* Building mission statement
Instructional Leadership	2*		10	* One was building mission statement
Staff Leadership	2*		10	* One was building mission statement
Systems Management			12	
Culture for Learning		1	11	
Professional Ethics and Advocacy	1		11	

Mission Statement Knowledge

The mission statement provides the context for school governance, decision-making, and management (Boerma, 2006), and can be the driving force to inform curriculum, programs, pedagogy, evaluation, architecture, interior design, hiring, and

hard-to-describe cultural components (House & Sears, 2002; Pekarsky, 2007). DuFour and Fullan (2013) encourage principals to ensure all stakeholders understand the school's and school systems' purpose, priorities, and goals. The mission statement can be the tool used to communicate these goals.

Principals were selected to participate in this study, in part, by the composition of their mission statements. Six principals were from districts with concise mission statements and six were from districts with comprehensive mission statements.

The concise district mission statements each had two elements and while they were broad, they targeted specific ideas. At least one element in each mission statement was about students. One mission statement specifically discussed the environment the school wishes to create. Two mission statements were commitments of school actions on behalf of its students.

The comprehensive mission statements contained between three and five elements. At least one element in each mission statement was about students. One of the mission statements was expansive and covered multiple aspects of the educational experience and goals for the school. Two of the mission statements indicated what the district will do for their students.

There were commonalities to be found in the mission statements, regardless of whether the mission statement was concise or comprehensive. Each mission statement had one element specifically about students. Half of the district's mission statements discussed partnerships: One discussed a partnership between the board of education, administration, and staff; one discussed the partnership between the community and the public schools; and one discussed the partnership between the school, parents, and the

community. Four of the mission statements were commitments of what they will do for students.

Of the twelve principals who participated in this study, only three knew their district's mission statement. The first was aware of and building on the district's mission, but, he says, it was not yet "ingrained" in the culture or in his or his staff's decision-making processes. The second was driven by a mission and leads a mission-driven school, but it was not the district's mission. He was driven by a building mission separate from the district's mission. The third principal was driven by the district's mission statement. She referred to the three mission statement components regularly throughout the interview, and she believed it was important for everyone in the school to know and communicate the mission effectively. Two principals recalled part of the district's mission. Seven principals did not know, or could not state, their district's mission statement. This information is presented below in Table 4.

Table 4

Mission Statement Knowledge

	Knew	Partially knew	No evidence/did not know
Mission Statement Knowledge	3	2	7

The responses of the principals in this multicase study suggest they prefer a concise mission statement over a comprehensive mission statement. Of the three principals in the study who knew their mission statements, two were concise. Of those two, one used a building mission statement, which was also concise. The principal who used her mission statement the most had a three-element, or comprehensive, district

mission statement. The most common justification made by principals for not using the mission statement was that it was “too long.” One principal who did not use her district’s mission statement indicated she prefers a “short” and “sweet” mission statement. The other justification made by principals for not using their mission statement was the statement’s generality or broadness. This argument was made both by principals whose district mission statement was concise and by those whose district mission statement was comprehensive. One principal who disregarded his district mission statement did so because he believed it was “the same as every single school district mission in the United States.” These findings indicate that if the mission does not have meaning for the principal, they will not use it. They will rely on something else to provide context for their decisions, to give their work meaning, and to dictate the direction of their efforts and, eventually, their school.

Mission Statement Inclusion and Display

This study’s original intent was to include principals whose schools utilized their district’s mission statement. Through the interview, evidence collection, and analysis processes, it was determined that two principals adopted building mission statements. These principals, both from the same district, used a concise mission statement. One of those principals utilized his building mission to lead, manage, and improve his school. The other referred to his building mission, but this researcher could not determine any utilization of the building’s mission to lead, manage, or improve his school.

The overarching question driving this study was: How do Nebraska public school principals utilize their school mission to lead, manage, and improve their schools? The district mission statement was stated as part of each district’s student handbook. This was

the only common usage among participants. The only other relatively consistent district mission statement inclusion was in the previous school improvement cycle's materials. Two of the districts adopted, or were developing, new mission statements as part of their current school improvement process. District mission statements were regularly posted throughout the building in areas such as the front office, the main lobby, and commons areas. The mission statement was not commonly posted in hallways, the principal's office, or classrooms. Table 5 presents the data regarding the inclusion and display of the district mission statement from this multicase study.

Table 5*Mission Statement Inclusion and Display*

	Utilized	No evidence/ did not utilize	Comments
Student Handbook	12		
Faculty Handbook	3	9	
Letterhead	3*	9	* From the same district
Certified Evaluation Tool	2*	10	* From the same district
Mentoring Program	3*	9	* From the same district
Most Recent School Improvement Visit Materials	4*	8	* In three of the six districts
Building Resource Usage and Improvement Planning Documents	1	11	
Curriculum Guide/Course Catalog	2	10	
Posted in Hallways	5	7	
Posted in Classrooms	3	9	
Posted in the Building	8	4	
Posted in the Principal's Office	2	10	

The purpose of this study was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. Based on their answers to these research questions, these principals, generally, did not utilize the mission. They did not use the mission statement because they do not know the mission statement. Those who knew the mission statement demonstrated possible ways to utilize their mission statement in all eight domains of the Nebraska Department of Education's *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (2017).

Potential Limitations of the Study

There may be some limitations to this study's findings based on the research methodology, the interview structure, and the participant selection.

1. Research methodology: Because this study was intended to create generalizations, it was designed to collect qualitative data from a large number of individual participants. Additionally, this study discussed all eight domains of the Nebraska Department of Education's *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (2017). These two factors could lead one to believe the study was too broad and too shallow to fully understand the practices of Nebraska principals.
2. Interview structure: From the outset of this study, the researcher stated his belief in the importance of determining how principals lead, manage, and improve their schools first and asking them about the district mission statement's impact second. This researcher believes the study's findings, based on the interviews conducted as part of this study, would have been different if the study had only asked principals the mission-related questions.

3. Participant selection: This study was limited to established principals. It did not include any new or new-to-the-district principals. Additionally, this study only included principals; it did not incorporate any input from staff, students, parents, or community members. The findings of this study may be different if changes were made to participant selection to include either of these sets of possible participants.

Recommendations

This study explored the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. It sought to shine a light into Schwartz's (2001) black box of practice, which separates a school's mission from the achievement of that school's mission and hides a principal's practices. Once exposed to the light, principal practices were generally found to be disconnected from a school's mission. In the following section, recommendations are presented for mission statements writers, for principals, for principal preparation programs, and for future research.

Recommendations for mission statement writers

Most of the principals in this study did not know their mission statement, because, they said, it was "too long." The most mission-driven principal in the study, though, served in a school with a complex mission statement, which means a "long" mission statement is memorable and usable, but it is not preferable. While the mission statement's length may be an issue, this researcher believes the obstacle to becoming mission-driven is the mission statement itself. This research did not specifically examine these district's formation or development of mission statements, but it is assumed they would have

involved some of all of the following: Superintendents, Board Members, parents, community members, or even students. The following recommendations are made to mission statement writers:

- Write a mission statement with no more than two or three elements.
- Focus the mission statement on the students, not the school itself.
- Write an actionable mission statement so new directives and initiatives can be connected to and inspired by the mission statement, in order to achieve it.
- Include the staff in the writing process.
- Write a mission statement with meaning.

Recommendations for principals

If this study demonstrates one thing, it is that these principals, generally, did not think about their mission statements. They considered a number of other factors, including their vision for teaching and learning, their personal beliefs, or “what’s best for kids” before they considered their district’s mission statement. If, however, principals were willing to consider their mission statement as their organization’s purpose, and achieving the mission statement as their responsibility, they and their schools could become mission-driven. Based on the findings of this research, the following are recommendations for utilizing the district mission statement in a principal’s efforts to lead, manage, and improve their school:

Context for Leadership, Management, and Improvement

- Use the mission statement to provide context and meaning for decisions and actions.
- Identify a vision of mission achievement outcomes with the staff.

- Share the vision of mission achievement outcomes with staff, students, families, and the community.

Vision for Teaching and Learning

- Align personal philosophy or vision with the district's mission statement and find ways to synergize the two.
- Create mission-based personal and school goals.

Developing Relationships

- Frame messaging around the mission statement and their efforts to achieve the mission.

Continuous Improvement Process

- Review the mission honestly.
- Rewrite the mission statement, if needed, to represent the school's true purpose.
- Write school improvement goals intended to achieve the mission statement.
- Use the mission to contextualize and justify academic, social-emotional, and behavioral goals.

Instructional Leadership

- Focus the school's curriculum and instruction to develop students' mission-critical skills, abilities, and understandings.
- Adjust the current curriculum, practices, procedures, programs, and opportunities to achieve the mission.

Staff Leadership

- Expect staff members to do the work necessary to achieve the mission and define this work with the staff.
- Incorporate mission-specific interview questions.
- Focus individual and staff-wide professional development to address mission-specific instructional skills and mindsets.

Systems Management

- Set mission achievement as the primary goal of systems management efforts.
- Build systems, allocate resources, and create an environment focused on achieving the mission.
- Create and set expectations, rules, policies, and procedures designed to help achieve the mission.

Culture for Learning

- Build the school culture around the mission.
- Display the mission statement and mission achievement outcomes in classrooms and hallways where students and teachers see it regularly.
- Reinforce, or reinvent, the school's traditions, rituals, and celebrations to support the mission.

Professional Ethics and Advocacy

- Align personal philosophies and beliefs with the school mission statement.
- Incorporate achievement of the school's mission into the principal's definition of ethical practices.
- Interpret policies through the lens of the mission statement.

- Educate stakeholders on the importance of achieving the mission and the school's efforts to achieve its mission.

Recommendations for principal preparation programs

Principal preparation programs have the power to influence how principals perform their work. Many of the principals in this study relied on subjective reasons and their own personal beliefs to make decisions for their school. Implementing the following recommendations could put a principal preparation program in position to create mission-driven principals and schools:

- Teach future principals to make contextualized decisions based on the mission statement.
- Adapt principal preparation programs to include the above recommendations for principals.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the utilization of mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools. This study answered questions and created future research opportunities. Recommendations for future research include:

- A long-term study following a single principal who uses their district mission statement to frame their decisions and actions would provide different insight into the utilization of a district's mission statement. Rather than identifying how a principal utilizes a mission statement, this study would uncover what happens when a principal fully utilizes their district's mission statement.

- An in-depth study of a single domain from the *Teacher and Principal Performance Framework* (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). By exploring a single domain, a researcher may be able to more fully understand the thoughts, considerations, decisions, and actions of principals.
- A long-term study following a principal to examine their decisions and actions for an extended period of time to determine the depth, if any, of mission utilization in their practice.
- An expanded study including new or non-tenured principals. An exploration of the practices of new or non-tenured principals may give insight into the approach of a principal who is new-to-the-district and their incorporation of their district's mission statement into their work.
- A study including teachers, students, parents, or community members to determine if their principals utilize their district's mission to lead, manage, and improve the school. This would provide an external view of the principal's actions, as opposed to an internal view.
- A modified study focusing on superintendents, teachers, coaches, and other educational leaders. With further modification, it could be extended outside of education to the social services or business realms. To adapt the current study, a future researcher would require organizational mission statements and common performance expectations.

Final Thoughts

This study sought to explore the utilization of school mission statements by Nebraska public school principals as they lead, manage, and improve their schools.

Through this study, the researcher hoped to shine a light on how mission drives practice.

In the end, with a few exceptions, it was determined that mission does not drive practice.

Practice is driven by other factors. It does not, however, have to be this way.

Three principals provided insight into practices and approaches influenced or driven by a mission statement. Their actions demonstrate that mission-driven school leadership, management, and improvement is possible, if a principal chooses to engage with the mission statement. Recommendations for this engagement, for practice driven by mission, have been presented for principals and for principal preparation programs.

The principal's work is the work of leadership, it is the work of management, and it is the work of improvement. It is the work of achieving school goals. The school's mission statement can underlie and unify all of this work and these goals. It can provide a context for the principal's decisions. If principals choose this approach to lead, manage, and improve their school, if they choose to implement these recommendations, their actions will be driven by their purpose. They, and their practice, will become mission-driven.

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Appendix A**Confirmation Letter**

Date:

Subject: Study Participant Confirmation Letter

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a participant in my dissertation research study through Doane University. The focus of this study is to explore the factors Nebraska public school principals use to lead, manage, and improve their schools. You have been invited to participate in this study because of the combination of your length of tenure as principal, your school's size, and your school's location. Your experience as a principal in the state of Nebraska brings important insight into this study, and will help other principals evaluate and improve their practices.

Your involvement as a participant will include the following:

1. Completing the attached Participant Information Form,
2. Reviewing and Signing the attached Informed Consent Form,
3. Participating in an Interview,
4. Providing School Access for a Site Observation,
5. Providing of Identified, Relevant Materials, and
6. Reviewing your Case Study Findings.

I will be in contact with you in the coming days to set up a time to discuss the necessary forms and materials, as well as to set up an interview time. At the conclusion of this discussion, I will provide you with the Participant Information Form, the Informed Consent Form, the primary Interview Questions, and a list of materials I am requesting from you. You can complete the participant information form electronically and return it to me. I will collect your signed informed consent form and the requested materials on the interview date. The interview will last between 90 and 120 minutes, and will be completed at the school outside of contract hours.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact me at any time by emailing derek.ippensen@doane.edu or by calling 402-380-0176. If you have concerns you would like to share with my dissertation chair, Dr. Marilyn Peterson, you may contact her at marilyn@neb.rr.com.

Sincerely,

Derek Ippensen
Principal Investigator

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors Nebraska public school principals use to lead, manage, and improve their schools. You have been invited to participate in this study because of the combination of your length of tenure as principal, your school's size, and your school's location. As part of my research, I am asking you to reflect on your practices within the context of the eight effective practices as identified in the Nebraska Performance Framework for Principals, as updated in July of 2017.

Anticipated Interview Format and Time Commitment:

Involvement in this research study involves being interviewed by the principal investigator, providing the principal investigator with access to the building for which you are principal for site observation, and providing the requested materials for examination, if the principal created and uses the materials. The list of requested materials will be provided in another document. The interview will last approximately two hours and will take place in your office outside of the school day. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and any subsequent dialog will be made for the purpose of future transcription.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known direct risks or discomforts associated with this research. There is the possibility of being identified through any unique language, phrases, or statements used in the interview or within the site observation or evidence analysis.

Most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought provoking. This may result in new insights regarding the daily practices associated with leading, managing, and improving their school. You will also be a part of this work, which could result in helping other principals evaluate and improve their practices.

The principal investigator in this study is regularly selected to participate in school accreditation external visitation teams. Because of the intimate look at the process and practices occurring in this school, the principal investigator will remove himself and decline any invitations to participate in this school's external visits in the future.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The information obtained in the study may be published or presented at conferences, workshops, or other venues with stakeholders interested in learning more about the subject of the study. Your name will not be reported in the study or in any subsequent publications, without your express consent. Pseudonyms will be used for participants and their schools. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data, although an advisor may assist in handling the data, and in such case, will be informed of the confidentiality of the data.

Compensation:

Participants in this study will receive a \$25.00 gift card upon the completion of the interview.

Institutional Review Board:

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects at Doane University. Doane University is committed to ensuring research involving human subjects is conducted with the highest possible ethical standards. You may contact the principal investigator at any time at 402-380-0176, or by emailing derek.ippensen@doane.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the principal investigator or need to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the Doane University Institutional Review Board by emailing irb@doane.edu.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw:

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the principal investigator or Doane University. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature certifies that you have read and understood the information presented and decided to participate. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Name and Phone Number of Investigator:

Derek Ippensen, Principal Investigator

Cell Phone: (402) 380-0176

Appendix C**Participant Information Sheet**

Pseudonym: _____ **Participant Name:** _____

School Name: _____

Number of Years in Education: _____ **Number of Years with District:** _____

Number of Years as Principal: _____

Number of Years at this School as Principal: _____

Highest Level of Education Attained: _____

Degrees:

What College(s) or University(ies) did you attend?

List any awards or special recognitions you have received:

In one paragraph, please provide a short personal bio or description of yourself:

Appendix D**List of Materials Requested**

Please supply me with a physical or electronic copy of the following materials:

- Student Handbook
- Faculty Handbook
- Letterhead
- Certified Staff Evaluation Tool
- Classified Staff Evaluation Tool
- Instructional Model
- Mentoring Program
- Most Recent School Improvement Visit Materials
- Current School Improvement Cycle Plan and Materials
- Hiring Interview Questions for Certified Staff Members
- Hiring Interview Questions for Classified Staff Members
- Building Resource Usage and Improvement Planning Documents
- Culture/Climate Assessment Tools
- Curriculum Guide/Course Catalog

Appendix E**Interview Protocol for Participants**

Pseudonym: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

School Pseudonym: _____

Introductory Comments:

The goal of this study is to explore the factors Nebraska public school principals use to lead, manage, and improve their schools. You have been invited to participate in this study because of the combination of your length of tenure as principal, your school's size, and your school's location. As part of my research, I am asking you to reflect on your practices within the context of the eight effective practices as identified in the Nebraska Performance Framework for Principals, as updated in July of 2017.

I have your signed informed consent with me today. I will be recording what we discuss as a way to conduct the interview. The recording will help me more accurately represent your practices and views. I hope you find the interview helpful as you reflect on your practices. Thank you, in advance, for your willingness to participate in this interview and study. We will begin with a couple of icebreaker questions before beginning the formal questions. Please relax and enjoy sharing your thoughts and discussing the practices you use to lead, manage, and improve your school.

Icebreaker Questions:

- How would you describe the role of the principal?
- Please describe the career path you took to get to this position.

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning

1a. What is your vision for teaching and learning?

- How did you develop this vision for teaching and learning for your school?
 - Who did you involve in this process?
- How have you communicated this vision to your teachers, students, parents, and community members?
- What is the message you share when you are discussing your vision for teaching and learning in your school?

1b. How do you establish goals for your school?

- Who did you involve in this process?
- What are your goals for the school?
 - How do you review those goals?

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships

- 2a. How would you describe your relationship with the school's students, staff, families, and the community?
 - How have those relationships evolved?
- 2b. How would you describe the family and community participation with the school?
 - How has that changed during your time as principal?
- 2c. When you communicate with students, staff, families, and the community, what is your message?
 - How do you communicate your message?
- 2d. How do you utilize social media?
 - How does your message change on social media?

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement

- 3a. How would you describe your school improvement process?
- 3b. When you consider your school improvement process, how do you select your goals and your actions?
 - What factors do you consider?
 - How do you develop the plan for improvement?
 - Who is involved in your school improvement processes?
- 3c. How do you keep everything focused and moving in the right direction?

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership

- 4a. What is your role in the curriculum of the school?
 - When you review curriculum and your educational programs, what factors do you consider?
- 4b. How do you ensure your students are being taught and learning a curriculum that aligns with the school's goals?
- 4c. How do you ensure the use of effective instructional practices in your classrooms?
- 4d. How do you assess the effectiveness of your curriculum and instruction?
- 4e. How do you evaluate the non-curricular programs and opportunities your school offers and engages in?

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership

- 5a. What are your expectations for the staff?
 - How do you establish and communicate these expectations?
- 5b. What is your process for recruiting and selecting high-quality professional and support staff?

5c. What is your process for developing and retaining high-quality professional and support staff?

5d. How do you plan for staff professional development?

- What factors do you consider?
- What factors do you emphasize?

Research Question #6: Systems Management

6a. How do you ensure the operations and systems you use are effective in helping you to achieve your goals?

6b. What factors do you consider as you manage your resources, such as financial, material, time, and human resources?

- What are the priorities you consider when making decisions about these items?

6c. What factors do you consider as you manage your school site, facilities, services, and equipment?

- What are the priorities you consider when making decisions about these items?

6d. What factors do you consider when discussing and reviewing expectations, rules, policies, and procedures?

- What priorities are taken into consideration?

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning

7a. How do you describe your school culture?

- How did it come about?
- What influence did you have in the development of the school culture?

7b. When you celebrate achievements or accolades, how do you frame the celebration?

7c. What are the most important or valuable components of your school culture?

7d. How do you assess your school climate and culture?

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy

8a. What do you consider your role in the school to be?

8b. What are the key elements you think of when you consider ethical practice?

- How do you model ethical practices?

8c. How do you align your interpretation of ethical practice, and the local, state, and national policies we are challenged to manage?

- How do local, state, and national policies and policy changes affect your school building?
- 8d. What are the most influential forces you face, from both inside and outside the school, in your efforts to achieve your vision for the school?
- How do you manage those forces?

Interview Protocol for Participants

Follow-Up Mission-Specific Questions:

I would now like to ask you a series of mission statement-specific questions. There is no right or wrong answer, just your answer.

1. What is your school's mission?
2. How do you know if you have achieved your school mission?
 - a. What does that look like?

Research Question #1: Vision for Learning: How did you incorporate the school mission into your vision of teaching and learning?

- How does the mission of the school guide and inform your vision for teaching and learning?
- How does your vision for teaching and learning put practices into place that will lead to the achievement of the school's mission?

Research Question #2: Developing Relationships: How do you utilize the school mission when developing relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?

- How does the mission of the school guide and inform your ability to develop relationships with students, staff, families, and the community?
- How do these relationships influence the school's ability to achieve its mission?

Research Question #3: Continuous School Improvement: How are the school mission and the continuous improvement process interconnected and interrelated?

- How does the mission of the school guide and inform the school's continuous improvement process?
- How do the school improvement goals and the entire school improvement process move the school closer to the achieving its mission?

Research Question #4: Instructional Leadership: How does the school mission influence your curricular leadership, and the direction of your programs, courses and curriculum?

- How does the mission of the school guide and inform the direction of the school's programs, courses, instruction, and curriculum?
- How do the school's programs, courses, instructional practices, and curriculum assist in the efforts to achieve the school's mission?

Research Question #5: Staff Leadership: How does the school mission influence the development of the staff, and the individual staff members in your school?

- How does the school mission guide and inform your plan for the development of the whole staff and individual staff members?
- How do these professional development practices assist the school in achieving its mission?

Research Question #6: Systems Management: How does the school mission influence the way you manage the organization, operations, and resources of your school?

- How does the school mission guide and inform your management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school?
- How do you make day-to-day organizational, operational, and resource decisions to create an environment where the school mission can be achieved?

Research Question #7: Culture for Learning: How does the school mission influence the culture of your school?

- How does the school mission guide and inform your efforts to create an effective school's culture?
- How are you creating a school culture in which the school mission can be achieved?

Research Question #8: Professional Ethics and Advocacy: How does the school mission affect the way you interpret and implement different local, state, and national educational policies?

- How does the school mission guide and inform your implementation of local, state, and national educational policies?
 - How does the school mission guide and inform the governance structure of your school?
 - How does the school mission guide and inform your definition of ethical practices?
- How do local, state, and national educational policies encourage and assist you in your efforts to achieve the school's mission?
 - How does the governance structure of the school aid you in achieving the school's mission?
 - How do ethical practices influence your ability to achieve the school's mission?

Concluding Question:

1. What didn't I ask you about that I should know in regard to specific influences on your leadership, management, and improvement of the school?

Concluding Question:

This concludes our interview today. I want to thank you again for participating in this interview. Your feedback will help to inform the research questions I am working to answer. I would also like to thank you for your efforts and contributions as a Nebraska public school principal. Thank you for making a difference for our state, our communities, our teachers, and our students.

Appendix F**Site Observation Protocol****Pseudonym:** _____ **School Pseudonym:** _____**School Mission:** _____

Is the mission posted in the hallways?	Yes No
What evidence was observed that the mission is reinforced in the hallways?	
Is the mission posted in the classrooms?	Yes No
What evidence was observed that the mission is reinforced in the classrooms?	
Is the mission posted elsewhere throughout the school?	Yes No
What evidence was observed that the mission is reinforced throughout the school?	
Is the mission displayed in the principal's office?	Yes No
What evidence was observed that the mission is reinforced in the principal's office?	

Appendix G**Evidence Analysis Protocol****Pseudonym:** _____ **School Pseudonym:** _____**School Mission:** _____
_____**Evidence Analysis Scoring Procedure:**

The evaluator will score the item in the following categories, based on the inclusion and utilization of the mission statement: (1) Not Referred To; (2) Stated; or (3) Stated and Explained. If an item was not provided, it was marked as not available (NA).

Document	Score
Student Handbook	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Faculty Handbook	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Letterhead	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	

Certified Staff Evaluation Tool	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Classified Staff Evaluation Tool	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Instructional Model	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Mentoring Program	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Most Recent School Improvement Visit Materials	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	

Current School Improvement Cycle Plan and Materials	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Certified Staff Hiring Interview Questions	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Certified and Classified Staff Hiring Interview Questions	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Building Resource Usage and Improvement Planning Documents	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	
Culture/Climate Assessment Tools	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	

Curriculum Guide/Course Catalog	NA 1 2 3
Evidence:	
Comments:	

Appendix H**Findings Review Form**

Project Title: Exploring the Utilization of Mission by Nebraska Public School Principals:
How does Mission Drive Practice?

Dear Research Participant:

Please review the enclosed findings based on our recent interview and the subsequent site observation and evidence analysis. Through this data collection and analysis, I attempted to capture the factors you consider as you lead, manage, and improve your school, and to capture how you utilize your school mission statement in this process. The goal of this review is to determine if the findings ring true to you as a participant in the study.

My signature below indicates my approval of the recorded interview at one of the following levels:

- I approve of the findings without reviewing them.
 I approve of the findings.
 I do not approve of the findings.

Signature of Participant

Date

Derek Ippensen – Principal Investigator

Appendix I
Data Collection Matrix

Is the mission posted in the school:	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10	#11	#12
Hallways	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Classrooms	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Throughout the Building	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Principal's Office	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9	#10	#11	#12
Student Handbook	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Faculty Handbook	2	2	NA	NA	NA	1	NA	NA	NA	1	1	2
Letterhead	2	2	2	1	1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1
Certified Evaluation Tool	1	2	2	1	1	NA	1	NA	NA	1	1	1
Classified Evaluation Tool	NA	NA	NA	1	1	NA	1	NA	NA	1	1	1
Instructional Model	NA	NA	NA	1	1	NA	1	NA	NA	1	1	1
Mentoring Program	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	2	2	2	NA	NA	NA
Most Recent School Improvement Visit Materials	1	NA	NA	2	2	2	NA	1	1	1	1	2
Current School Improvement Cycle Plan and Materials	1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1	NA	NA	NA	NA
Certified Hiring Interview Questions	1	1	NA	1	1	1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1
Classified Hiring Interview Questions	NA	1	NA	1	1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1
Building Resource Usage and Improvement Planning Documents	NA	NA	NA	NA	2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	1
Culture/Climate Assessment Tools	1	NA	NA	1								
Curriculum Guide/Course Catalog	2	1	1	NA	NA	1	NA	NA	NA	1	1	2

Key: (1) Not Referred to; (2) Stated; (3) Stated and Explained

Appendix J**External Review Letter**

February 12, 2021

Dear Derek Ippensen,

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Chapter 4: Findings of your dissertation. I related to your research as I too interviewed school principals in conducting research for my own phenomenology study and dissertation in 2016. There is so much that can be learned from case studies or lived experiences of practitioners who are doing the day-to-day work.

I found your summaries of each participant as well as the cross-case analysis and summary consistent with my thoughts in reviewing your research. Some specific examples that were apparent to me that you also mentioned in your cross-case analysis were:

- Many of the principals could not recite the mission of their school or district, yet many of them were able to share phrases or important beliefs that were present in their leadership. Most all of your participants seemed to own their lived beliefs, and there were pieces of the mission that aligned.
- The professionals represented in the case study consistently mentioned “what is best for kids” as their resounding mantra. This was apparent in most all of the cases and you emphasized this a great deal in your cross-case analysis and summary.
- Relationships and trust were spoken about a great deal. Their importance was evident in the case studies, summaries, and analysis.
- The actions of visibility and role modeling their personal beliefs was evident in the case studies of the principals. You mentioned in your summary that this “set the tone” for many relationships whether it was staff, students, parents, or community members.
- The principals spoke of instructional leadership and curriculum development in sync as many of them had direct roles in monitoring, selecting, and even purchasing curriculum. Your findings mentioned that this was a job duty of many of the principals due to the size of their school district.

Thank you for the opportunity to review your findings. I found them to be very consistent as I read the data. Best to you in finishing out your process.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melissa Poloncic
Reviewer