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LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN RURAL IL
EMPOWER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

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A Capstone Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Education

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education
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CAPSTONE PROJECT APPROVAL

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EMPOWER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of Educational Administration

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

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**TITLE: LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN RURAL IL
EMPOWER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. William Bradley Colwell

The purpose of this study is to give guidance to those building level administrators who find themselves confused and overwhelmed by a process that has some high stakes decisions that need to be made in a very short time frame. The study will determine school improvement practices that are present in successful IL EMPOWER schools that building administrators can use in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

“Why not take the five billion a year that President Trump wants to put into these neo vouchers and put it instead into educational interventions in these schools that are of concern toward educational interventions that have been shown to help children?” said Kevin Welner, Director of the National Education Policy Center as reported on an edweek blog written by Blad, 2020. Welner agreed with President Donald J. Trump that there are schools across the nation that are not serving the needs of students. Furthermore, he argues that by implementing the practices that are known to help children, schools will improve.

Other presidential administrations in the United States also wanted to improve public schools. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The goal of the original law remains today: Schools should provide quality education to all students, especially those considered low income students. Over the past fifty-five years, Congress has amended ESEA eight different times, including enacting No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002. Most recently in 2015, federal lawmakers amended the Act from NCLB to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Regardless of the name of the law, the federal government holds states and school districts accountable for meeting the educational needs of all students (Education Post, n.d.).

Federal Government Requirements

The ESSA law outlines how the federal government will hold the states accountable in their school improvement efforts. The federal government requires each state that receives Title 1, Part A, Section 1003(a) school improvement funds from the federal government to meet three statutory requirements and comply with the requirements of the state. For Illinois, these requirements are specified in the Illinois School Code (105 5/2-3.64a-5). First, the State must ensure that all students in grades 3-8 and grade 11 in high school are tested in math and

reading. In addition, a science test will be given in grades 5, 8, and 11. These assessments will not only measure if the students are at grade level, but they will also measure student academic growth to determine if schools are meeting the needs of their students. Next, the state has to develop a standard that measures primarily academic performance, but also includes at least one non-academic performance measure. Examples of non-academic measures include school climate, attendance, and parent surveys. Finally, the state must develop a school improvement process and be able to identify the schools that are falling in the lowest five percent of all schools (105 ILCS 5/2-3.64a-5). These schools will receive financial and academic comprehensive support. Each state, including Illinois, has developed its own system of school improvement (Education Post, n.d.).

Illinois EMPOWER Initiative for School Improvement

In 2018, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) wholly revamped the school improvement process for “lowest performing” and “underperforming” schools to meet the requirements established by the federal government. Prior to this, ISBE’s school improvement process left districts and schools with very little voice or choice. For example, schools did not choose a learning partner, nor were they able to determine the focus of the school based on a state provided list of goals. This changed with an initiative called IL EMPOWER, Illinois’ new statewide system of supports. IL EMPOWER provides a level of accountability for schools by completing the process outlined below (ISBE, 2017, p. 29).

The goal of IL EMPOWER was to develop a collaborative effort between state, school, and learning partners while providing a system of supports and accountability to schools. Further, IL EMPOWER changes ISBE from an agency that gathers little input from schools to an agency that provides avenues for schools to give their viewpoints in addressing the learning needs of all students. Under IL EMPOWER’s three-year cycle, schools are able to choose their learning partner, what goals to focus on, and how to spend grant funds (ISBE, 2019a, p. 1).

As ISBE specified in its comprehensive strategic plan, the State is invested in IL EMPOWER to support schools. Beginning in the year 2018, each school received one of the following designations: “lowest performing”, “underperforming”, “commendable”, or “exemplary” (ISBE, 2017). These designations are calculated from academic and school quality indicators. The academic indicators are English Language Arts/Math proficiency and growth, Science proficiency, and English Language Learners Access scores. The school quality indicators are chronic absenteeism and climate survey (105 ILCS 5/2-3.64a-5).

Once all of the above categories have been tabulated, each school in Illinois will receive one of the four designations. If a school earns one of the bottom two designations, the State provides support by assigning each “lowest performing” or “underperforming” school a Support Manager, an ISBE employee, who will work closely to help oversee a seven point, rigorous process that includes a needs assessment and school improvement plan. Support Managers are experienced in leading school transformation (ISBE, 2019a). In addition, the State provides \$100,000 to “lowest performing” schools and \$60,000 to “underperforming” schools to use during the first year to hire a learning partner and to purchase items or materials to help meet the goals of the school improvement plan (ISBE, 2019a, p. 1).

Schools may choose a learning partner from a network of approved IL EMPOWER learning partners. Learning partners provide planning, implementation, and monitoring services to help access student and school data and to provide guidance in school improvement. Furthermore, to guide the school through the comprehensive needs assessment each school will use the Illinois Quality Framework and Illinois Quality Framework Supporting Rubric, which consists of seven standards, multiple indicators, and questions (See Appendix A). These seven standards are continuous improvement, climate and culture, shared leadership, governance, education and employee quality, family and community connections, and student learning (ISBE, 2019, b).

To conduct a needs assessment, schools should gather stakeholders' teams to analyze multiple data sources and compare the system's performance against the seven standards. To gather multiple data sources, the learning partner can lead the school through the needs assessment process by conducting staff, teacher and administrator interviews; meeting with parent groups; and reviewing data.

IL EMPOWER Process for a “Lowest Performing” School: A Deeper Look

The following are the steps in the IL EMPOWER process to improve student achievement specifically for schools who receive the “lowest performing” designation from the State. This is a fairly lengthy process which has five steps. First, administrators have their initial meeting with their state-assigned Support Manager. The Support Manager's role is to guide administrators through the IL EMPOWER process while providing technical assistance. Their next steps involve writing the school improvement grant, which includes a goal's section to justify how the school will spend the grant funds. These steps must be completed in the short time frame of one or two months. Additionally, building administration will begin interviewing and choosing a learning partner from the state-provided list. Selecting the best learning partner and then meeting with the learning partner's representatives takes a few weeks. Once the learning partner has been chosen, they can assist the school by conducting a comprehensive needs assessment based on the Illinois Quality Framework and Supporting Rubric. Since the grant is written prior to the administrators receiving the results of the needs assessment, school leaders begin researching school improvement strategies to assist them in writing the goal section of the school improvement grant. The following flow chart demonstrates the IL EMPOWER process:

Table 1: Flow Chart of the IL-Empower Comprehensive Support Pathway (adapted from ISBE, 2018).

| IL-Empower Support Pathway | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| | | School Receives Lowest Performing Designation | |
| F | | ↓ | |
| A | ← | Initial Meeting with ISBE Support Manager | → |
| L | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| L | Complete School Improvement Grant | Assemble School Improvement Team | Review and Contract with a Learning Partner |
| | | ↓ | |
| | | Conduct Data Analysis of Academic and School Quality Indicators | |
| | | ↓ | |
| | | Conduct Needs Assessment Using Illinois Quality Framework and Rubric | |
| | All of this is completed by the end of December. | | |

As a currently sitting superintendent who has gone through this process, I found myself in need of constant support and direction and looking at the plethora of research available on

the various strategies and variables affecting student achievement – I found it to be overwhelming. I was new to the district; IL EMPOWER was new; and I started with the district already in the beginning stages of IL EMPOWER. I had to quickly become knowledgeable of the IL EMPOWER process. I met with our learning partner after just a few days of beginning as superintendent to decide what our goals would be for our initial plan and teacher training. This initial plan was not our school improvement plan, but rather a plan to work with until we could write our school improvement plan. I was informed by our learning partner that they had completed a needs assessment by interviewing administration and teachers just a few months ago. The learning partner had also assisted the district in completing the Illinois Quality Framework using the Supporting Rubric. Soon thereafter, I met with our ISBE-assigned Support Manager. She provided me with a “road map” of what had to be accomplished by the end of December. Essentially the entire IL EMPOWER cycle had to be completed again for our district.

The school improvement grant had to be written first. Not knowing what would be best for my district, I obligated all funds for our contract with our learning partner. As an initiative of our initial plan, we were working hard to implement professional learning communities district wide through training provided through our learning partner for the teachers and the administration. Even though research shows professional learning communities to be effective in improving student achievement, I could not help but think whether or not this strategy was what was best for our school. Would it produce the achievement growth in students we wanted to see? The pressure was on because in just a few short weeks we would conduct another needs assessment, complete the Illinois Quality Framework, and write specific measurable goals for our school improvement plan. As an administrator with years of experience, I found the decision making of what goals to focus on extremely difficult due to the overwhelming amount of research available to administrators on school improvement. What if I chose the wrong focus and led the district in the wrong direction?

Therefore, I want to take an extensive review into what I found will be the key seven

strategies from the literature to see how I can help school administrators. It is a cumbersome and lengthy process that moves very quickly. As a result, some people have done well navigating this process, and at some pivotal points they made key decisions that were most impactful. What did they do that was most impactful in the process to get their students from point A to point B?

Problem Statement

In 2018, the state of Illinois had 115 Illinois elementary schools that received the “lowest performing” designation. Over the next year, only 25 of the 115 Illinois schools were able to raise their designations up two rankings from where they were in 2018. Surprisingly, one school was able to raise its designation up three rankings from where they were in 2018. By accomplishing this, these schools have shown that they no longer require the supports of IL EMPOWER. While under IL-EMPOWER, all 115 of these elementary schools received the same state support: Support Manager, identical financial support, and a learning partner. So why did some elementary schools improve two or three rankings and some not?

Purpose of the Study

Given the comprehensive nature of the Illinois EMPOWER process and the inordinate number of options available to them, the purpose of this study is to give guidance to those building level administrators who find themselves overwhelmed by a process that results in high stakes decision making regarding school improvement initiatives. The study will determine school improvement practices that are present in successful IL EMPOWER schools that building administrators can use in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois.

Research Question

What building level administrative practices are present in rural IL EMPOWER elementary schools in southern Illinois that demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

While research (Robinson, Lloyd, Rowe, 2008; Hattie, 2015) on this topic already exists, the focus of this study will be its application to the leadership in elementary schools in rural southern Illinois that have shown the most impactful growth effect on student achievement. Specifically, the schools involved in this study will have shown student achievement ratings improve from “lowest performing” to “commendable” or “exemplary”. This study will help show what administrative practices those schools put into place to increase student achievement when other southern Illinois elementary schools are not having the same level of success.

Research has been conducted to determine the effect size that a variety of school improvement strategies have on improving student achievement. Most prominently, Hattie (2009) conducted his own meta analysis and the results showed 252 influences on student achievement. He has continued to modify this list with more data; now the list stands at 320 influences (Corwin, 2021). Hattie’s studies provide an analysis that school administrators can turn to when trying to improve student achievement in their schools. Thus, is there a need for additional research on this topic? Even though the review of the literature shows some similarities, there are also some contradictory findings in the research. For example, Robinson, Lloyd, Rowe concluded that instructional leadership had an effect size of .42 (2008), while Hattie concluded that the effect size was .31. Hattie’s results did not quite reach the highly effective target (2015). For leadership, an effect size of .36 or greater is considered to be highly effective practices (Robinson, 2011, p. 3).

The results of this study will be beneficial to elementary school building administrators who are exploring strategies that are the most impactful on improving student achievement. After review of this research study, the reader should take away a “toolbox” of strategies that can be used to improve student growth.

Definition of Terms

ISBE - Illinois State Board of Education

IL EMPOWER - is the statewide system of support that empowers schools with greater choice in determining their path to improved student outcomes (ISBE, 2019a)

Support Manager - provides technical assistance and guidance for school improvement to each school with lowest performing or underperforming designations (ISBE, 2017).

Designations - In 2018 and 2019, Illinois schools receive one of the following from the state: Exemplary, Commendable, Underperforming, or Lowest Performing.

Effect Size - a way of quantifying the difference between two groups, that has many advantages over the use of typical tests of statistical significance alone (e.g., t-test). It can be used with any outcome in education.

Illinois Quality Framework - a needs assessment provided by the state for schools to use that have either a lowest performing or underperforming designation (ISBE, 2019b).

Learning Partner - a state approved partner who supports IL EMPOWER schools through the three-year cycle school improvement process.

Teacher Clarity - Clearly communicate the intentions of the lesson and the success criteria (Hattie, 2012).

Teacher Efficacy - a teacher's confidence in their ability to promote student learning.

Response to Intervention - Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs (RTI, 2020).

Reciprocal Teaching - is a scaffolded, or supported, discussion technique that incorporates four main strategies—predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing—that readers use together to comprehend text.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

An assumption was that all participants responded honestly and completely during interviews.

A delimitation of this study was that the study was completed in southern Illinois, and the study does not represent any urban schools. Another delimitation of this study was that one school was not studied due to the researcher being employed at said school.

A limitation of the study was that only 26 elementary schools in Illinois improved two or three designation rankings, only three of which were in southern Illinois. Another limitation was a third testing point was unavailable due to the pandemic.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The study will show what building level administrative strategies were used in Illinois elementary schools to raise student achievement by two designations. By moving up two rankings, schools are able to move out from under the umbrella of IL EMPOWER. The following will show the organization of the dissertation.

In Chapter Two, a review of the literature of existing research will be presented. The effect size of improvement strategies will be discussed and a comparison of studies will be charted. While there are many practices that affect student achievement, the study will look specifically at the following: shared vision and goals-setting direction, strategic resource management, instructional leadership-improving the instructional core, collective efficacy-redesigning the organization, teacher learning-developing people, ensuring an orderly and safe environment, and connecting with external partners.

Chapter Three will discuss the methodology process used in the study. Schools in rural southern Illinois that have gone from lowest or under performing to exemplary designations determined by the state of Illinois will be studied. The researcher will conduct a case study at each school to determine what administrative practices were implemented that resulted in the most impactful student growth. Chapter Four will discuss the data that were collected. The final chapter, Chapter Five, will close with a summary of conclusion, recommendations, and final thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study will center on rural elementary schools in southern Illinois. The research available on rural schools is small although it is growing. This study will focus on building administration in rural elementary schools and what strategies they use in their schools that have the greatest impact on student achievement. Today more than ever there is higher accountability for schools and mandates that legislatures expect to be carried out by school leadership. Since the student enrollment in rural schools is often lower, there are typically fewer teachers and administrators. Very often there is only one or two administrators in rural schools who are responsible for all the duties of the school. These responsibilities are not only focused on being an instructional or transformational leader, but also on the everyday activities such as checking symptoms of students, helping serve lunch, driving the bus, changing a light, or updating the outside marquee (Allensworth & Hart, 2018, p. 3). Even so, the building leader is still responsible for academically moving the school forward.

For rural school leaders, research shows that due to rural schools being spread out over larger geographical areas, it makes it more difficult for leaders in these districts to collaborate and share ideas (Stewart & Matthews, 2015), leaving them to feel relatively alone. A study by Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) suggested that rural school building administrators act as the source of leadership in the school, and they do so isolated from their peers in the field of education. In other words, the literature on rural school district leaders suggests that the leadership strategies and goals of the district are dependent on the building leader. This counters the suggestion of leadership research that encompasses all school districts, which states that overall the leadership in schools is one of shared leadership, and that if building level administrators try to shoulder all of the responsibilities of leadership that they are risking burnout (Marks & Printy, 2003). Rural administrators need to know what leadership strategies they can implement and share so that improvement will be seen throughout their school including student

achievement.

Authors Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom stated:

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school. Leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst. (2004, p. 7)

Thus, without a strong and confident leader, lower performing schools are unlikely to make strides towards improving student achievement.

In 2010, Leithwood and Harris conducted a study of building administrators whose schools had moved from lowest performing to distinguished. They combined what they learned during their study with the results of previous studies and developed four main areas of focus for school leaders: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional core. Each of these areas is supported by additional leadership strategies (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012). The authors shared that “rarely are – [these] practices sufficient for leaders aiming to significantly improve student learning in their schools. But without them, not much would happen” (p. 10). It is important for leaders to study the practices principals use in different settings to move student achievement forward.

The review of relevant literature addresses leadership strategies that will most impact student achievement in rural schools. Several practices exist that affect student achievement, but which ones have the largest growth effect on student achievement? Seven themes that developed during the review were school vision and goals-setting direction, strategic resource management, instructional leadership-improving the instructional core, collective efficacy-redesigning the organization, teacher learning-developing people, ensuring an orderly and safe environment, and connecting with external partners.

School Vision and Goals-Setting Direction and Purpose

Research on effective schools shows that higher performing schools develop a vision

and goals collectively with its stakeholders, share the vision, and move the school forward. According to a meta-analysis conducted between 1978 and 2006 that studied the connection between leadership and student achievement, establishing goals and setting expectations had an effect size of .42 on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). In terms of research, this is a moderate effect (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Leaders cannot measure if they are successful without a clear vision and goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

In high achieving schools, the development of a vision and goal for learning is highlighted and is inherent to the school improvement process (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The vision should show how all the components of the school will function at a designated time in the future (Stonge et al., 2008). The leadership of a higher performing school looks different than at a lower performing school. The focus in a higher performing school is to ensure the goals and expectations are communicated to all stakeholders, keeping the community informed of the school's academic successes, and celebrating the academic achievements with the students and staff (Robinson, 2011).

So before the goals can be shared, they need to be developed. What does research conclude regarding the process of goal writing? In 1998, Phillip Hallinger and Ronald H. Heck conducted a study involving forty principalships across all types of schools which included all grade levels and both urban and rural. Their study revealed that by setting clear shared goals, leaders can influence student achievement (Hallinger & Heck). Even though setting direction may seem like a simple task, "it is the method by which the direction is decided and subsequent activities that may be just as important as the substance of the direction itself" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 545). An additional study said developing goals must be done in a collaborative manner (Fullan, 1992). An example of collaboration is collective goal setting. Collective goal setting means a group of people are writing the goals and objectives, who then work together to strive to achieve the goals. A leader who develops goals with the involvement of stakeholders

throughout the entire process allows for understanding and commitment by everyone involved in the goal writing (Latham & Locke, 2006).

Research also showed that it is more beneficial to student achievement to write learning goals instead of performance goals. Learning goals focus on the “discovery of the strategies, processes, or procedures to perform the task effectively” (Latham & Locke, 2007, p. 294). “Deciding on specific, short-term, easily understood, and facilely measured goals translate aspirations into reality” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 547). A vision statement should be brief, direct, and easy to elucidate. Anyone who reads the vision statement should be able to interpret the purpose of the organization and what will be achieved (Latham & Locke, 2006).

In order for leaders to have the greatest impact, they must have a clear sense of purpose and vision. A transformational leader is able to develop and communicate a meaningful vision that will inspire others to work hard to accomplish the vision. Alan Mulally stated:

It's important to have a compelling vision and a comprehensive plan. Positive leadership - conveying the idea that there is always a way forward – is so important because that is what you are here for – to figure out how to move the organization forward. (Gordon, 2017, p. 29)

In addition, a transformational leader must be able to motivate others to join the journey to work hard so that the vision will become a success. A leader must be confident that the school will be successful in achieving the goals (Cotton, 2003). Once the vision has been developed, the leader must share the vision at every opportunity. Everyone should know the why and the purpose and references should be heard in conversations throughout the building (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Based on the individual strengths of each employee, the leader should help each one of them determine how they can personally contribute to the vision. Furthermore, the employees need to know they are imperative in making the organization successful (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Strategic Resource Management

When it comes to managing the resources of a school, a leader needs to consider the vision and goals of the district. Leaders should base decisions on how to use limited resources in order for the effect on student achievement to be the greatest. According to Viviane Robinson, there are three questions a leader should be asking. First, is the district's spending habits supporting the learning goals of the district? Secondly, does research support the district's choices in instructional supports and resources? Thirdly, is the district's student learning time and teacher schedules in line with the district's goals and meeting the needs of the district (Robinson, 2011)?

After answering these questions, the next step is to evaluate the results. From the results, the leader must be able to make sound decisions on spending, staffing, scheduling, and purchasing resources (Bryk et al., 2010). Teacher selection and placement generally makes up a majority of the budget, so effectual leaders manage the employment placement so that it supports the vision and goals of the school (Leithwood, 2012). Miles and Frank supported this in their findings, when a district makes a substantial reallocation of resources the result will have an effect on faculty and staff positions. "Using school resources more effectively takes courage because it means setting priorities and being strong enough to say that some things are simply more important than others-even when these priorities demand ending a cherished program" (Miles & Frank, 2008, p. xi).

Through Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's meta-analysis they concluded that the research found the average effect size of strategic resource management on student achievement to be .31 and addressed the strategy necessary for administrators to align resources with ideal program delivery. For a practice to be considered highly effective in leadership it must have an effect size of .36 or greater (Robinson et al., 2008). Hattie conducted his own meta-analysis in 2009 and came up with 252 influences on student achievement. He has continued to update this list with more research and now the revised list stands at 320 influences (Corwin, 2021).

Strategic resource management is not listed specifically as one of the greater influences on student achievement (Hattie, 2015). Nevertheless, he does list strategies such as technology with learning needs students, after school programs, service learning, and response to intervention. Any one of these could be the avenue a district chooses to use to meet its instructional goals and therefore its resources.

Instructional Leadership-Improving the Instructional Core

The primary strategies for improving the instructional core is through classroom visits, evaluations, and feedback. Instructional leaders are focused on student learning and are always looking at data as evidence of learning (Hattie, 2015). Hattie's research found that the effect size of leadership on student achievement was .36 (Hattie, 2009). This was below the average effect size of .40 and was doubted by some of his colleagues.

Robison, Lloyd, and Rowe researched transformational and instructional leadership and found the effect size of both on student achievement. The effect of transformational leadership was found to be .11 and the effect size of instructional leadership was found to be .42 (Robinson et al., 2008). The comparisons of the effect sizes of transformational and instructional leadership is statistically significant.

The work that administrators do is comprehensive, but preserving experience, knowledge, and confidence in the curriculum, instruction, and assessment means that building leaders truly understand the classroom environment and the challenges that exist in their profession (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Leaders have to learn not to let the day to day management issues consume their time and focus. According to the Illinois School Code, building leaders should be using a majority of their time for practices that fall under instructional leadership (Illinois Compiled Statutes, Article 10, 2020).

Baeder defined instructional leadership "as the practice of making and implementing operational and improvement decisions" (2018, p. 2). The administrator is monitoring the curriculum, instructional program, and assessments to determine if the teacher's instructional

core is aligned to the vision and goals of the district (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Everyone in the organization should have adequate information to make better decisions. For building leaders to make decisions for the betterment of the organization, they have to know what is going on within the classrooms. Leaders can gather more information, by visiting classrooms, conducting evaluations, and collectively studying the data, and it opens up the opportunity to have conversations with the teachers regarding this information (Baeder, 2018).

Instructional leaders are directly involved in supporting teachers through classroom observations. By visiting the classrooms, leaders are able to give nutritional feedback to teachers for improvement, gain knowledge of students, and observe school wide initiatives. Leaders can provide formative and summative feedback to teachers through observations and the conversations that follow to help them improve instruction for students (Cooper et al., 2005). Monitoring curriculum and instruction is also a benefit of classroom visits and observations and has an effect on student achievement (Cotton, 2003). In addition, through monitoring and providing regular feedback to teachers, teachers understand that they are supported and know what is expected to be accomplished (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Feedback plays an important role in how the leader guides the staff and is an important part of teacher learning. One goal of a leader should be to give effective feedback. It is not enough for leaders to tell others “great job” or that they “really like what they saw”, the encouragement should go further and explain why they thought it was a great job.

As leaders conduct weekly walkthroughs and evaluations, they should focus more on learning goals, success criteria, and feedback. When feedback is given it should be specific for what went well, what could change, and why that change would be beneficial, while being given in a nonjudgmental, positive, genuine, and descriptive manner. In addition, the leader should have conversations with the teachers to reflect on their lessons and discussions regarding what they might do differently next time to improve the lesson. The leader should also ask questions that teachers can contemplate to promote continuous improvement. All feedback should be

presented in a timely manner (Baeder, 2018). Lastly, allowing time for teachers to share with each other what they have learned from their feedback is an improvement strategy which will be discussed in more depth in the following section on collective efficacy.

Collective Efficacy-Redesigning the Organization

Bandura, a psychologist at Stanford University in the 1970s, noticed a pattern when he studied groups and their success. Through his observations he observed that when a group of individuals had confidence in what they were doing collectively, the group was found to be more successful. In schools, when leaders, teachers and staff members as a unit believe they can impact student achievement, there is much higher levels of student success (Bandura, 1993). Bandura named this “collective efficacy” and explained it as “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment” (Bandura, 1997, p. 477).

Models of collective efficacy have been shown to have a positive effect on student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004). In 2011, Eells conducted a meta-analysis study on collective efficacy and student achievement. Eells reviewed studies beginning in 1941 through 2006 and focused on the distribution of the effect size between collective efficacy and student achievement. The study also considered how this relationship might vary based on variables such as school level and location (Eells, 2011). Based on the study’s results, Hattie concluded collective efficacy to be the most influential factor on student achievement; giving it a 1.57 effect size (Hattie, 2015).

Collective efficacy has a significant impact on improving a school by bringing together various individuals and providing them with opportunities for success. By participating in this process, not only will the team grow but also the unique individuals that comprise that team. The chances are more likely that each member’s individual self-efficacy grows through this process while increasing the overall achievement of the district (DeWitt, 2018).

Leaders can influence collective efficacy by providing a healthy environment for collaboration, having conversations about what impacts student learning, setting expectations, and allowing these strategies to become part of the daily routines. When leaders have a pulse on the mindset of collaboration teams and have built a culture of trust, the leader is able to navigate through difficult times in a respectful manner without losing collective efficacy (Marzano et al., 2005). Redesigning the organization is based on the foundation that the building leader should provide the teachers with the avenue of collaboration that allows for teachers to reach their fullest potential. Nourishing the school's culture, adjusting the organization's structure, and building opportunities for collaboration of all the stakeholders are ways that effective leaders can be purposeful in changing their buildings into successful schools (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2005).

Developing a school collaboration team should be a priority for leaders. The team should consist of members who represent the whole school. The team's primary purpose is to oversee the implementation of the school improvement plan while providing support for teachers and staff as needed.

Schools must address the challenges of meeting the needs of all learners. One way to improve practices is to create a school team that will structure and lead processes designed to transform teaching and learning. Using a team approach is also a practical way to ensure that the many leadership tasks that must take place in a successful school are executed efficiently and effectively. (Sulzberger, 2011, p. 2)

Members of the team should communicate essential information and encourage others to take ownership in the school improvement strategies.

Effective leaders distribute and share leadership and decision making rather than centralize these functions, develop a sense of community rather than centralize these functions, develop a sense of community rather than individuals, encourage

collaborative work efforts rather than isolate practitioners, and base authority on expertise rather than role or position. (Murphy et al., 2006)

In addition, effective leaders use several forms of student data to assist the improvement efforts of the school. The review of student data may occur during departmental meetings, grade level teams, and individual exchanges (Murphy et al., 2006). Many schools will study data while meeting in their Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Research shows that leaders who have implemented PLC teams will more likely take responsibility for student learning, expect higher student achievement, (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), share in teaching practices, have teacher transparency, have sustained improvement, (Bryk et al., 2010), and develop a shared leadership.

Building leaders may have to modify the current schedule to allow time for team collaboration meetings. One way to accomplish finding time is to dismiss students one hour early one day each week. This type of organizational change emphasizes the importance of collaboration among teachers and staff. Given appropriate time and a consistent message from the leader, teachers will become more comfortable with sharing accomplished instructional practices and their challenges with each other. Administration allows for the staff to share in leadership when practicing collaboration. Glickman said, "In successful schools, principals aren't threatened by the wisdom of others; instead, they cherish it by distributing leadership" (2003, p. 56).

Leaders who positively influence student achievement think carefully about how to construct a school environment that both demonstrates a concern for the people in the organization and enables these same adults to achieve personal and organizational goals. (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 552)

Teacher Learning-Developing People

Three ways to develop people as a leader are to focus on quality professional development, build trusting relationships, and understand the staff's emotional intelligence.

According to a study conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe, the largest affect on student achievement is through leading teacher learning and development (Robinson et al., 2008). Based on the research, the effect size on student achievement was .84. Much of the evidence used to draw these conclusions had leaders actively participating in learning as a leader and learner. The context of the learning occurred in staff meetings, professional development sessions, and hallway or office discussions (Robinson, 2011). In higher performing schools, teachers are more likely to have discussions on instructional strategies and see their leaders as an instructional source (Friedkin & Slater, 1994).

Hattie's research showed the impact of teacher learning on student achievement to be an effect size of .53 (Hattie, 2015). Offering professional learning and professional development activities to the adults within the educational organization builds genuine learning experiences (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2017). Leaders also need to look at the needs of the school to determine what teacher learning would be beneficial.

Robinson stated that there are six characteristics of effective teacher learning:

- Meets the needs of students and teachers
- Centered on the association between teaching and student achievement
- Gives valuable content
- Blends theory and practice
- Seeks out experts
- Provides several learning occasions (Robinson, 2011).

Schools that are measured as successful have leaders that are providing their entire staff with worthwhile professional development (Marzano et al., 2005). The leader needs to model learning and participate at all levels with teacher learning (Prestine & Nelson, 2003). Effective leaders see the whole picture and use the abilities of the teachers and staff in teacher learning (Fullan, 2002).

A leader can have a perfect vision and set of goals that should take the organization far, but if no one has the desire to follow the leader then it is to no avail. Pete Carroll said, “Leadership comes down to taking care of the people in your organization and making them the best they can be, not giving up on them and never failing to be there for them” (Gordon, 2017, p. 99). A leader is able to build trusting relationships. Jon Gordon presents five guidelines why trust is so important:

- People follow the leader first and the leader’s vision second.
- Trust is the force that connects people to the leader and his or her vision.
- If your team trusts you, and your optimism causes them to believe in you, then your vision will inspire them to follow you.
- Trust generates commitment; commitment fosters teamwork; and teamwork delivers results.
- Trust is built one day at a time, and yet it can be lost in a moment (Gordon, 2010, p. 65).

Without trusting relationships between the leader and the employees, very little progress will be made towards transforming the organization (Gordon, 2010).

Another way to develop people as a leader is to pay close attention to a leader’s emotional intelligence. According to the Segal, et al., the definition of emotional intelligence is “the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict” (2019, p. 1). This type of leader understands the stakeholders and has developed a trusting relationship with the individuals involved (Leadership Styles, 2019).

Recent evidence suggests that emotional intelligence displayed, for example, through a leader’s personal attention to an employee and through the utilization of the employee’s capacities, increases the employee’s enthusiasm and optimism, reduces frustration, transmits a sense of mission and indirectly increases performance. (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 24)

The following leadership practices that support and develop the leader's staff are providing individualized support and consideration, offering intellectual stimulation, and modeling appropriate values and practices (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

The support can look differently in each school. A few examples may be to have instructional coaches model instruction, observe peer's classroom during instruction, and to provide feedback to teachers. New teachers should have support from a mentor who will assist them through the first few years (Center for Collaborative Education, 2003). Hitt and Tucker through their study have developed strategies to use in building professional capacity.

- Selecting the right fit
- Providing individualized consideration
- Building trusting relationships
- Providing opportunities to learn for whole faculty to include leader(s)
- Supporting, buffering, and recognizing staff
- Creating communities of practice
- Engendering responsibility for promoting learning (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 549).

Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment

How can students focus on learning and teachers focus on teaching if they do not feel safe at school? School leaders should be practicing the following items:

- Accommodate an environment that is safe and orderly
- Accommodate an environment that is pleasant and nurturing
- Safeguard clear discipline policies and enforce them consistently
- Safeguard high standards for student interactions
- Leaders need to act as a buffer between parents and officials, allowing teachers to focus on their teaching (Heck et al., 1991).

Schools that intervened in these areas were found to be more successful in student achievement (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

An effective leader will nurture a school climate that is conducive to students taking an active role in their own learning. There are three aspects to student engagement: “behavioral, emotional, and cognitive” (Wang & Holcomb, 2010). Behavior consists of showing up to school, being a class participant, and engaging in classroom and after school activities. When students feel they are a part of the school community, can relate to their teachers, and like their classes and events, they are emotionally engaged. Cognitive engagement is when the students are having meaningful reflection on what is being learned, planning for assignments, and checking their own work for understanding. When these three types of engagement are present, higher student achievement will follow (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

The impact of ensuring an orderly and safe environment on student achievement was shown to be an effect size of .27 (Robinson et al., 2008). An additional study resulted in a very similar effect size (Marzano et al., 2005). Even though this initiative does not have a substantial impact on student achievement, without it in place student learning becomes very difficult.

Connecting with Family and Community Partners

Hitt and Tucker added an additional domain after studying the research: relationships with outside partners and community is important to improving schools. One standard on the Illinois Quality Framework that the Illinois State Board of Education uses to evaluate schools is family and community engagement. The indicators of this standard are how the school is communicating to the caregivers regarding all aspects of the student, how the school is using all local resources for the betterment of the students, and how the school is involving stakeholders in the decision making process at the school.

Leaders who find ways to optimize the contributions of parents, families and community partners see increased student achievement. The following are three practices of this area, according to Hitt and Tucker:

- Building productive relationships with families and community
- Engaging families and community in collaborative processes to strengthen student learning
- Anchoring schools in the community (2016, p. 559).

Summary

In conclusion, a thorough review of the literature revealed several leadership practices that have a great effect on student achievement. Rural administrators need to know what leadership strategies they can implement and share so that improvement will be seen throughout their school including student achievement. The research showed that in rural schools the building leader is often responsible for all areas of leadership.

In addition, the results showed themes of the research to be school vision and goals-setting direction, strategic resource management, instructional leadership-improving the instructional core, collective efficacy-redesigning the organization, teacher learning-developing people, ensuring an orderly and safe environment, and connecting with external partners. These leadership practices are not listed in any particular order of importance. The following chapter will describe the methodology the researcher used to complete the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to give assistance to building level administrators whose school earned a “lowest performing” designation from data gathered from Illinois Assessment of Readiness and Science assessments as well as climate surveys. The study will determine school improvement practices that building administrators can use in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois that will have a positive impact on student achievement. This chapter will include the research question, design, and methodology as well as a description of the population and research instruments. The chapter will conclude with a description of the data collection, analysis, ethical considerations and summary.

Research Question

What building level administrative practices have the most impactful growth effect on student achievement in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois?

Research Design

The research design used in this study will be qualitative methodology. Qualitative research originated in the social and behavioral sciences. Qualitative design is a way of studying and coming to a better understanding of individuals or groups in relation to social or human issues (Creswell, 2009). According to Leavy, this approach is designed “to generate meaning and produce rich, descriptive data” (2017, p. 124). Furthermore, the qualitative method is most often used in “descriptive research” (Leavy, 2017, p. 124), which is what this study seeks to do.

Rossmann and Rallis stated that qualitative researchers “gather what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities” (1998, p. 5). When the researcher conducts the study in a natural setting, it is a qualitative design (Rossmann & Rallis, 1998) because researchers tend to collect data on site. By talking with individuals in person and

seeing how they behave in their natural setting is a prime characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

Research Methodology

There are five types of qualitative methodologies and for this study the researcher has chosen to use a case study (Sauro, 2015). The qualitative case study will be completed at two elementary school districts in southern Illinois. A qualitative researcher normally will use several forms of data to complete a study. The researcher may utilize various data collection methods like focused interviews, observations, accounts of individuals, and an archive review while conducting a case study. By using multiple data sources, the researcher can triangulate them to “validate the accuracy of their patterns and findings” (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Multiple methods of data collection and analysis help to establish reliability along with internal validity (Creswell, 2009). Triangulation helps to confirm a researcher's instinctual perception, cross review various sources, conditions, or perspectives to see if there is a recurrence of themes (Hendricks, 2017).

A case study strives to comprehend a social phenomenon (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Case studies are a method of inquiry in which the researcher examines in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Stake, 1995). While most case studies tend to focus on one entity, sometimes two or more cases may be selected and compared. Furthermore, a case study allows the researcher to complete an in depth study of the entity so that the researcher can gain an exhaustive understanding of the methods used to collect the data and the reasoning of the data (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The reader should be able to understand the situation as if they were actually there in person. In addition, by having a clear sense of the setting, the reader can better understand the results of the study (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Three components that will be used to gather data in the case study are interviews, observations, and an artifact review.

Interviews will be used to acquire additional detailed information from individuals at the schools. Conducting interviews is one of the most common qualitative research methods (Efron

& Ravid, 2020). Efron and Ravid went on to state that “this method of inquiry provides an understanding of the participants’ experiences from their own perspectives because it allows them to voice their ideas, opinions, values, and knowledge” of the topic being studied (p. 103). The researcher will conduct a structured interview, which means the participants will be asked questions using precise wording and in the same order so that all participants are responding to the same information (Seidman, 2013). All participants will be informed of the purpose of the study and sign a consent form if they wish to participate. The researcher will read a script to open and close the interview. The following are potential participants in the interview: administrators, teachers, instructional coaches, department chairs, lead teachers, learning partners, managers of school supports, school leadership team members, and guidance counselors/social workers.

In addition to interviews, the second component of the case study will be observations. Observation refers to intentionally examining an environment (Angrosino, 2016). The researcher will note any information during the observation that is relevant to the study. Specifically during this case study, the researcher will be looking for any of the seven themes discussed in Chapter 2: school vision and goals-setting direction, strategic resource management, instructional leadership-improving the instructional core, collective efficacy-redesigning the organization, teacher learning-developing people, ensuring an orderly and safe environment, and connecting with external partners. If additional themes surface during the observation, these will be noted as well. The researcher keeps a record of the behaviors, activities, and individuals of the school being observed. Sometimes the observer may want to take in the setting before deciding what is noteworthy (Creswell, 2009). Efron and Ravid asserted that “in contrast with interviews, in which the participants’ voices guide your understanding, observation allows you to be aware of nonverbal behaviors, gestures, and body language” (2020, p. 91).

Lastly, the third component of the case study will be an artifact review. In a school setting, artifacts may be board agendas, meeting minutes, budgets, team agendas, school

improvement plans, professional development documentation, social media postings, evaluation criteria, bulletin board postings, and state reports such as school report cards. The researcher will be looking for any indicators of impactful school improvement, such as school goals, how funds are budgeted to support school improvement, and how they are sharing the vision with others. These documents allow the researcher to gain insight on the culture, history, priorities, vision, customs of the school (Efron & Ravid, 2020).

Population

The researcher will conduct the study at two rural elementary schools in southern Illinois. These two schools received IL EMPOWER support as a result of their 2018 state test results just like 115 other schools in Illinois. Yet in 2019, the data showed that only these two schools in southern Illinois had improved from “lowest performing” to “commendable” or “exemplary” designations as determined by ISBE. School A is in a town with a population of 837 people. The school consists of grades K-5 with 158 students. School B is in a town with a population of 5,436 people. The school consists of grades K-4 with 288 students. In 2019, each school received the same level of funding, \$100,000, to spend towards academic improvement strategies. The students in the two sample schools have shown academic growth, and by using the methods of a case study, focused interviews, and artifact review, the researcher will seek to learn the reason(s) behind their academic improvement.

Instrumentation and Sources of Data

The researcher will conduct a structured interview. The school level personnel interview will consist of thirteen questions and the school level administration interview will consist of sixteen questions. The interview questions were coded to align with one or more of the predetermined seven themes. The interviews will begin with general questions and move to more detailed or open ended questions. Prior to conducting the interviews, the questions were pilot tested with a panel of superintendents and revisions were made accordingly. The interview protocols are located in Appendix B and C, respectively. The Human Subjects Committee of

Southern Illinois University Carbondale approved this study and the interview protocol.

Data Collection and Management

After the Human Subjects Committee approved this study, the researcher contacted the superintendent at both schools and arranged a time to discuss the study and how the data would be collected. Next, the researcher arranged dates to visit each school. During the initial visit, the researcher, with the assistance of the superintendent, developed a list of potential participants.

The list of potential participants were individuals that would be the most knowledgeable regarding the school improvement initiative during the school's first year of the IL EMPOWER cycle. The building administrator helped the researcher determine the most knowledgeable individuals, and the researcher invited them to be a part of the study. If they agreed to participate, a time was scheduled for an interview. Prior to the interview, the researcher sent each interviewee a letter with information explaining the interview and a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix B and C). The protocol contained instructions for the interview, a reminder that the interview would be recorded with their given consent. Each participant signed a consent form prior to the interview (Appendix D). After the interview was completed, the recorder was turned off and the researcher reviewed the field notes with the interviewee for clarification and accuracy.

At the initial meeting with the superintendents, the researcher will set up times to conduct observations. The researcher plans to observe professional learning community meetings, school improvement meetings, classroom instruction, small group or individual student interventions, parent/teacher meetings, and one quarterly meeting with a Support Manager and Learning Partner. If there are questions raised as a result of the interview process, the researcher will pursue any new information provided by conducting observations. During the observation, the researcher will keep a collection of field data. The field notes will be a result of what was observed that relates to school improvement while on campus at both schools. These

notes will help the researcher remember the details of the activities and events of the setting being observed.

The researcher requested documents from the superintendents that were relative to learning more on the building level administrative strategies that were used to improve student achievement. These artifacts consisted of school improvement plans, board meeting agendas and minutes, professional development documents, faculty meeting agendas, professional learning community agendas, budgets, and needs assessments. The researcher made notes on the documents as they were read and will use these notes to help analyze the data upon completion of the document review.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher is using the literature review as a means to set up the themes of the study. A thorough review of the literature revealed there are several leadership practices that have a great effect on student achievement. Specifically, the results revealed seven themes including:

- school vision and goals-setting direction (SG)
- strategic resource management (RM)
- instructional leadership-improving the instructional core (IL)
- collective efficacy-redesigning the organization (CE)
- teacher learning-developing people (TL)
- ensuring an orderly and safe environment (SE)
- connecting with external partners (EP)

The researcher will use these themes as predetermined categories to help determine what theme(s) was most impactful on student improvement. If any emerging categories surface, they will also be included in the data analysis.

Data collected through the interview process, observations, and document review from both elementary schools will be subject to the content analysis scheme of Creswell (2012). All

the data were collected, transcribed, and read to have a general understanding, and then the text was coded (Creswell, 2012). During this time, the researcher kept the data separate and avoided making interpretation or judgment (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The triangulated data collected during the interviews, observations, and artifact review will be divided into one or more of the predetermined themes within each school.

The second cycle of analysis involved the cross-referencing of data from the interviews, observations, and article review to uncover common patterns and themes. All of the data collected was read multiple times to check for accuracy.

As the interviews were conducted, the researcher began transferring all the data into readable text (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The notes taken during the interviews will be typed, and the recordings of each interview will be transcribed. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher separated the readable text into the seven predetermined themes (Creswell, 2009).

Similar to the interview data, the observation data were transferred to readable text. The researcher then read through the data thoroughly so that it could be sorted into the seven predetermined themes. While doing this, the researcher made notes in the margins and also made sure the information was credible with verification by a member check from those observed (Creswell, 2009).

Member checking provides the interview participants an opportunity to review the interview results and discuss the researcher's interpretation of the data. Peer review from regional administrators, who have previously obtained their doctorate, will allow for feedback on the data and the researcher's interpretation of the data. Efron and Ravid explained that peer review helps the researcher "to determine the credibility of your interpretation and the accuracy of your findings" (2020, p. 77). The same process was also completed for the artifact review. Each document was reviewed and categorized for each elementary school.

In summary, the researcher will review all the data and how it was categorized. If it was necessary to seek verification, the researcher took time to receive feedback from the

participants through a member check. Once feedback was given, the data analysis was completed. The researcher used a graphic organizer to display the collected and categorized data.

Confidentiality

To protect confidentiality, anonymity of the data will be a top priority (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The researcher will avoid identifying the two elementary schools involved in the study as well as the individuals who volunteer to participate in the interview process. Each school and its members will only be identified as school A and school B. Any identifiable information from artifacts will be removed from the document for the purpose of the study. The records of this study will be kept private and secured in a locked file. In any report that is published, the researcher will make every effort to ensure the participants' identity is kept anonymous.

Validity & Reliability

Since the results of the research study will be applicable to all rural elementary leaders whose schools received a "lowest performing" designation, it has external validity. Field notes will be reviewed for accuracy by the interviewer at the conclusion of each interview and coded to one of the seven themes, as well as documents viewed during the artifacts review.

Summary

In conclusion, this research study on school leadership strategies that are the most impactful on student achievement of rural elementary schools will benefit all leaders working in these schools. When administrators learn that their school has received the "lowest performing" designation, it can be very overwhelming. Some of the questions they ask themselves are "what do I focus on?" and "where do I start?" The research study will add to existing literature and give the reader a list of strategies to use to improve student achievement.

The study was completed using the qualitative method. Two rural elementary schools that went from a "lowest performing" rating to a "commendable" or "exemplary" rating were used in the study. Through observations, interviews, and an artifact review data were collected. This

was a conceptual method with leadership strategy representing the stimulus and the students academic performance representing the response.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH

Chapter four contains the data that were collected during the research study. The researcher conducted the study at two rural elementary schools in southern Illinois. These two schools received IL EMPOWER support as a result of their 2018 state test results. In 2019, the data showed that both schools had improved from “lowest performing” to “commendable” or “exemplary” designations as determined by ISBE.

School A is in a town with a population of 837 people. The school consists of grades K-5 with 158 students. School B is in a town with a population of 5,436 people. The school consists of grades K-4 with 288 students. In 2019, each school received the same level of school improvement funding, \$100,000, to spend towards academic improvement strategies. The students in the two sample schools have shown academic growth, and by using the methods of a case study, focused interviews, and artifact review, the researcher will seek to learn the reason(s) behind their academic improvement.

First, the researcher will share what was reported during the interviews with teachers and administration from School A and School B. This section will be arranged by school and by interview question and the data collected for each question. Each question has been coded to align with one or more of the seven themes: school vision/goal setting (SG), instructional leadership-improving the instructional core (IL), teacher learning-developing people (TL), connecting with external partners (EP), strategic resource management (RM), collective efficacy-redesigning the organization (CE), and ensuring an orderly and safe environment (SE). While reporting out each question for each school, the researcher will also share a review of the articles that were collected and notes of observation while conducting the case study at both schools that supports the interviewees' responses. The following table shows the seven themes and the abbreviations used for each theme. If any additional themes surface during the interviews, they will be added to the results.

Table 2: Question Alignment Key with Themes

| | |
|---|--|
| SG School Vision/Goal Setting | RM Strategic Resource Management |
| IL Instructional Leadership-Improving the Instructional Core | CE Collective Efficacy-Redesigning the Organization |
| TL Teacher Learning-Developing People | SE Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment |
| EP Connecting with External Partners | |

Focused Interview Results - School A

Role and Motivation

At School A, the researcher interviewed two teachers, the Curriculum Director, the Principal, and the Superintendent. The first teacher interviewed was a second grade teacher, and she had been with the district for six years. Next, the researcher interviewed a fifth grade teacher, who had been teaching in the district for eleven years. Together the researcher conducted an interview with the Principal and Superintendent. The Principal had been working in the district for eleven years - four years as the Principal and seven years as a teacher. The Superintendent had been with the district for eight years.

When asked what motivates them in their role, the teachers, principal, and superintendent unanimously stated: "the students". Teacher A1 claimed, "I want to do my best for them everyday." Teacher A2 talked about how much she loves teaching and coming to work, and she wants her students to love coming to school as well. The superintendent discussed wanting the school to be the best it could be for the students. Improving test scores across the district is what motivates the Curriculum Director.

Why is your school successful in school improvement?

In general, the respondents explained that the school's focus changed and became more centered on school improvement. Time was dedicated each Monday to discuss school

improvement, evaluate data, and have conversations that had not been happening. Up until five years ago, the elementary school had experienced quite a bit of teacher turnover, claimed Teacher A2. She went on to state, "We have a group of teachers that have proven to be dedicated to the school and it has made a world of difference. We are able to share and collaborate more." Similarly, the Curriculum Director discussed how the school improvement plan had been just a "document on the shelf" prior to 2019. Since that time, the district has been transparent and now engaging in difficult discussions regarding what the achievement data shows.

External Partners (EP)

When asked if external partners are welcomed at the school, all respondents focused on parental/community involvement in the schools. Specifically, the superintendent declared, "Absolutely, we highly value community input." Both teachers, principal, and curriculum director echoed this sentiment. The teachers and administrators reported that many parents are involved in their child's education through a variety of avenues, including family reading night, open house, parent teacher conferences, and parent teacher organization (PTO) events. Parents and school staff work together to plan room parties, school dances, fundraisers, community events, and sock hops, where the parents are also invited to attend. Teacher A2 shared her reflection, "I would see parents at those parties that wouldn't come to parent teacher conferences or respond to emails, but they would come to class parties." The principal serves with the parents and community members on the PTO, using it as an avenue for obtaining their input on school issues.

School A uses a variety of ways to communicate to its local stakeholders. Through electronic/social media venues— both district and classroom Facebook pages – and the district website, class folder that goes home nightly, parental contact (Remind 101 app, an all-call system, notes or emails, individual phone calls, face-to-face meetings, and weekly newsletters),

as well as Class Dojo and Teacherease. Teacher A2 likes to communicate by sending letters home through email or handwritten notes.

I like to send positive notes or emails home at the beginning of the year just to check in and say your child is doing a great job paying attention and he is so excited to learn. So if something comes up later, I have already had a positive exchange with them, and I have found they are more receptive to hearing something of a more difficult conversation later if they know you are not just focusing on the negatives of their child. (Teacher A2)

Some of the information communicated with stakeholders are school events, homework assignments, positive notes, class activities for the week, what the students are learning at school during the week, pictures of class activities, and student progress.

Mission and Vision Statements (SG, IL, EP)

Both teachers and administration agreed that their district had mission and vision statements. Generally, teachers and administration could state the basic idea of mission and vision statements. "All the stakeholders will come together to promote the wellbeing of our students", stated Teacher A1. The Curriculum Director said the mission statement states, "how we are going to do anything for our students academically to become successful members of the community." School A's mission statement found on the school's website is "Our mission is to teach all students so that they can attain their maximum educational potential & become productive, contributing citizens in our society." The district's vision is "to excel in meeting the educational needs of the district's students" was also found on the district's website.

Neither the teachers nor the administrators knew who created the school's mission and vision statements. Both statements were written at least twelve years ago before any of the participants were employed by the district. When asked if the mission and vision statements impact your work, Teacher A1 stated, "It does generally, but I don't go to it and reference it to make decisions or anything in that nature." Teacher A2 concurred,

Do I think about it every time I come into the building, no. Maybe I should. I believe in what it says. We realize that not all the students here at this school are probably college bound, and we want them to be productive and we want them to be able to find a job when they leave here and that drives what we do. (Teacher A2)

The Superintendent believes that the reason for the mission and vision statements "is to drive everything we do."

The mission and vision statements can be found on the district website, posted in some classrooms and at the front entrance of the school as observed by the researcher, on the Principal's Monday Memo, and on the Curriculum Director's *Thursday Thoughts*. The Superintendent added that the learning partner, American Institute for Research (AIR), has assisted the district in projecting the mission and vision statements to the stakeholders. The school began working with AIR during the 2018-2019 school year after learning that they received a "lowest performing" designation.

Strategic Research Management (RM, TL, IL, CE)

The teachers were asked what resources do you have that are most useful in your instructional role, such as professional development, teaching supports, and curriculum materials? Some teaching supports mentioned were Interactive Online Learning (IXL), STAR program for benchmark testing, and chromebooks. Both IXL and STAR are used to monitor student growth. IXL has allowed the teachers to arrange lessons based on students' skill sets.

IXL has been wonderful. I noticed the engagement levels of students were increasing as well as their knowledge. All of the students have chromebooks and we are one-to-one. For example, just today we did lessons on point of view. Yesterday we had a PowerPoint and guided notes. All of the students worked on a lesson on point of view at the 5th grade level, those struggling I could stop and help them and work with them. I had four students receive a score of 100, so I could put them at the 6th grade level and could continue helping those struggling. It's amazing, it is aligned to our textbooks, our

Journeys and our *Envision*. It can be used as supplemental materials. If she is teaching lesson 3 in *Journeys* and she clicks on that lesson, it will show all of the IXL lessons that go with that lesson. If I want to focus on a standard, it shows all of the levels that focus on that standard. Students love it and work for tickets if they get a 100. (Teacher A2)

Teachers were divided when asked about availability of resources for students.

Specifically, A1 said the administration is very supportive and will provide resources for the teachers if they are able to provide a reason. However, one teacher asked for a Teacher Pay Teacher school wide account and was told it was limited and would not provide the teachers what they may need. This was the only resource that was requested and it was denied.

When the Administration was asked if resources were supporting the learning goals of the district, they all said "yes". When asked what specific resources were used in instructional roles, the Superintendent referenced the Title I budget as documentation of expenditures for the learning partner, AIR, and a paraprofessional. Through the learning partner the district was able to provide professional development on setting smart goals, instructional strategies, and leadership and instructional coaching. In addition to Title I resources, Administration has also provided the staff with chromebooks for all the students, smartboards in the classrooms, and time to focus on curricular alignment. Regarding curriculum, the Curriculum Director has focused on aligning the curriculum with the state standards.

I looked at the standards that each grade said they were teaching and in the beginning the teachers worked on curriculum calendars to see how long they were working on a standard and what standards they focused on. We worked in small groups and looked at their curriculum calendars to see if there were any standards that were redundant or missing in those calendars. I also had K, 3, 5, 8, 12 work together to see what standards our students should master by graduation. (Curriculum Director, School A)

Another facet of resource management can include the daily schedule and teacher assignments. The administration was asked if the school's learning time, teacher schedules,

and placement of employees is in line with the district's school improvement goals and meeting the needs of the district. The Principal discussed how the schedule was changed to allow for more time for the staff to meet for professional development, school improvement planning, collaboration time, and data review. School is dismissed an hour early on Mondays to allow for these activities. Some teachers have shifted teaching responsibilities so the administration can place them where they are needed most. The Principal went on to state that they now look at the needs of their Reading and Math classes and place paraprofessionals in those classes to assist the teacher and students. Lastly, when asked how the school evaluates its allocation of funds towards school improvement efforts, the Superintendent stated, "We evaluate by using our student data to see if we are progressing." She further explained that they are building a system of school improvement that will carry on once the grant funds are gone.

Decision Making (CE, IL, EP)

The teachers were asked how important decisions are made in the school. Both teachers reported that the entire staff collaborates in making school improvement decisions, but one did note that final decisions come from the superintendent. Teacher A1 explained that even though the group may not always agree on a direction to go, they are able to come to a compromise and move forward. When asked if there are challenges, one teacher reported that not everyone feels comfortable sharing issues or concerns due to fear of others' reaction. But overall, both teachers reported that they do feel their opinion is valued.

The following is an example of the decision making process at School A. Administration reported that they use the Monday meetings to hear staff concerns. After meeting with the staff, the administration team will meet to consider the information collected. The Superintendent went on to say that she listens to and considers community and staff input before making decisions on what is best for students. After deciding, the administrative team will then present a plan to the staff. When the administration was asked if there are challenges, they all reported

staffing shortage as the biggest challenge. The Superintendent stated, "The ability to deliver quality services in the way we want to due to a teacher shortage."

How often are school improvement goals and expectations communicated? (SG, IL, CE, EP)

Both teachers noted that the entire staff is part of the school improvement team so every teacher/paraprofessional is aware of the goals within the school system. Teacher A2 stated, "Everyone is on the team and buy-in has helped everyone get on the same page. Communication is better." However, neither teacher knew if school improvement goals and expectations were being communicated to families or the community. Teacher A1 went on to explain how the goals are evaluated:

On our plan, it actually has what our action steps are, timelines, and who is responsible for completing it. We look at our state test results to see if overall what we are doing is making a difference and improvement in our students. (Teacher A1)

The school also uses student data from STAR and IXL to evaluate progress throughout the school year. During the Monday Meetings, the team reviews STAR assessment data to evaluate student progress and sets aside one Monday per month for the staff to revisit the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The Principal stated, "Our goals are aligned to the state testing, so I pull the proficiency report (from STAR) which will show the teachers what each child will score on the state test." The Curriculum Director added that the review of STAR data will "identify areas of concerns of individual students or as a whole." In addition, student STAR scores are shared with the parents and the school board after fall/winter/spring benchmarks. One last function of the Monday Meetings is to conduct/analyze a needs assessment for the district. At the onset when the school first started working with AIR, the learning partner completed a needs assessment using the Illinois Quality Framework, and the results were used to drive goal making. The Superintendent explained they devoted a great deal of Monday Meeting time to complete the needs assessment each year.

Recently, the school added another layer of school improvement data. All students are

surveyed four times a year. The survey is divided into grades K-3, 4-8, and 9-12. During a district improvement meeting, the teachers and administration worked together to select and edit questions. They are using the survey results to make improvements in instruction and culture and climate.

Ensuring a Safe and Orderly Environment (SE, EP, SG)

During the past few years, many updates were made to improve the security of the school. New cameras, door locking system at the front of the school, metal detectors, intercom system, and hand held radios have been added as security measures. The researcher observed these security measures during the school visit. All participants reported an orderly and safe environment. Prior to making the security improvements, the external community was informed of the coming security measure changes and why the school felt these upgrades were necessary.

All teacher participants perceived that student voices are heard through student surveys as well as by assisting with class schedules, and making class rules. The school does not have a social worker nor a counselor, but it does have access to a social worker through the county that comes about once a week. The Curriculum Director is improving the Social Emotional Learning curriculum for the entire school that teachers are using within their classrooms.

Is Trust Valued at your School? (IL, CE, TL)

All teachers and administrators said “yes”, trust is valued at our school. Teachers indicated that trust extends to both the internal and external operations of the school. For example, the teachers stressed that their internal conversations remained private and were not concerned about those discussions being shared with the community. They also stressed how important trust is within the classroom. Teacher A1 tells her students that “I am trusting you to do the right things because I can’t be there with you all the time.” Teacher A2 talked about how trust goes both ways between her and the students.

Administration was asked how trust is promoted by leaders. They reported how the

entire staff is a part of the District Team and the school improvement process. No one is excluded. The Curriculum Director said trust is an area they continue to work on to improve. Some ways the administration is keeping the staff informed are ensuring the staff knows they have been heard and following up with timely action, being transparent with our plans, using a weekly newsletter for communication, and providing articles on areas they have chosen to work on.

The administration also motivates the staff through such examples as staff recognition for their accomplishments, starting each meeting with positives, being visible and available, recognizing birthdays, conducting team building activities, providing school spirit wear, and occasionally offering teachers a break by serving as substitutes in their classroom. Moreover, each District Team meeting starts with recognition of staff and student accomplishments. When asked who else takes the lead on implementing district-level expectations, one administrator stated that some teachers have tried but they stopped when they perceived resistance from other staff members.

Teacher Learning (SG, TL, IL)

Who is leading teacher learning activities? Teachers reported that the Principal, Curriculum Director, AIR, and sometimes guest speakers are leading the learning activities. Both teachers and administrators reported there are a mix of ongoing and one time activities. Some ongoing activities are working on school improvement goals and action steps, evaluating student data, visiting each other's classrooms, and working on curriculum calendars. A one time activity shared with the researcher was a guest speaker presenting on staff well being.

AIR has focused on leading the school through the needs assessment using the Illinois Quality Framework indicators, writing the improvement plan, strategies that can be used to work towards the goals of the District Improvement Plan, facilitating conversations amongst staff, and providing student data in graphs and charts. Once the school wrote the plan and action steps, AIR supported the staff with teacher learning on instructional strategies, how to promote rigor in

the classroom, and student engagement.

The administration has the staff complete a survey on professional development needs and requests at the end of each year. Not only are activities offered onsite, but teachers are encouraged to attend professional activities off campus as well. For example, the Curriculum Director sends teachers professional development information as she received it. The District will also reimburse college tuition for those taking coursework.

How is Student Instruction Developed and Monitored? (IL, CE)

The teachers use the state standards and student data to drive their instruction. Over the past few years they are focusing on doing better for their students which means raising the bar both academically and emotionally. Teachers share their student expectations with parents at open house, parent teacher conferences, and during orientations.

Student instruction is monitored using STAR, IXL, and local assessments and is evaluated collaboratively during Monday meetings with the staff as seen on the agendas. Teachers reported using the data to make changes in their instruction where needed. Teacher A2 discussed how she noticed her students were lacking skills in math facts, so she found a quick and fun way to add math facts into her daily routine. Not only are teachers evaluating data as a team, they are also looking at student data acquired from formal and informal assessments and IXL within their own classrooms. The Curriculum Director and Teacher A1 noted that the students monitor their own STAR growth. For example, Teacher A1 shared how she sits down with each of her students to discuss the STAR test and what it means. She then shows them their test results from the first benchmark and together they set a growth goal for the student. The students keep track of their own goal. Administration recognizes students for their work on STAR benchmarks and for achieving their growth goals.

IL EMPOWER Learning Partner (SG, IL, CE, TL, EP)

School A is using AIR as their learning partner. The school's focus as a result of the needs assessment has been Reading, Math, and Culture and Climate. Some actions that were

used to improve in these areas were focusing on informational text across all subjects, teaching reading skills, adding time for independent reading, practicing standardized test prep questions more, writing curriculum calendars, increasing academic rigor and student expectations, focusing on instructional strategies in Math and Reading, and heightening student engagement.

The learning partner led the district through the school improvement process. AIR assisted the school in setting goals, action steps, and making a timeline to achieve those goals. The learning partner also provided instructional coaching for teachers and leadership coaching for administration. They taught the staff how to collect student data, look at the data and evaluate it, and then have collaborative conversations regarding how that data impacts instruction. Each summer the school has worked with AIR for professional development on these topics. The first year the length of the camp was a week. After that, the administration thought it would be best to shorten the camp to three days. The emphasis during the camp is mainly on instructional strategies. AIR has also assisted the school with its Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Teacher A1 stated, "She thinks things they learned with AIR will continue once they are gone."

What role did administration have in the school improvement process? The teachers reported that they worked with the Principal and Curriculum Director more often than with the Superintendent. The Curriculum Director stated that she works very closely with AIR in planning the monthly events, but she also said that the administrative team meets weekly to discuss the school improvement process.

In 2018, the state of Illinois had 115 Illinois elementary schools that received the "lowest performing" designation. Why do you believe your school was able to improve two or more levels while receiving the same comprehensive supports as the other schools, while 89 other schools were not successful? The resounding response was collaboration. Specifically, the Principal answered, "The small community our school has was an advantage and we were able to include our entire staff in the process of school improvement. Everyone bought into the

process." The Superintendent shared why she felt they were successful:

The collaboration among all parties brought school improvement to the forefront. We weren't working in isolation any longer. People were expected to reach out to each other. Having the learning partner involved also helped. The organization of the system particularly the alignment of grades and how we are teaching.

The Curriculum Director said she thought it was "the conversations, the new positions, their dedication to improving, the learning partner to focus on improvement."

Based on your administrative experience, what building level administrative practices seemed key in improving your school at least two designations? Interestingly, the answers varied between the three administrators. First, the Curriculum Director stated it was being transparent with how administration was guiding the district and making sure stakeholders knew it was for our students. She reiterated the necessity of "having hard conversations and getting everyone on the same page." The Principal proclaimed it was supporting teachers and having increased communication. Lastly, the Superintendent said it was providing teaching materials and technology so the staff had everything they needed. She went on to say the Curriculum Director has been "instrumental in the school improvement process as well."

Focused Interview Results - School B

Role and Motivation

At School B, the researcher interviewed two teachers and the Superintendent/Principal. The first teacher interviewed was a fourth grade teacher who had been with the district for four years. Next, the researcher interviewed a third grade teacher who was ending her thirteenth year with the district. The Superintendent/Principal had been with the district for twelve years. He started as the Principal of the Elementary School for eight years and then became the Superintendent in addition to the Principal the past four years. When asked what motivates you in your position, the two teachers stated their students are what keep them going as well as looking at the "big picture." The Superintendent stated what motivates him is "to give them

(teachers) the best chance to be the best teacher they can be."

Why is your school successful in school improvement?

Teacher B1 was quick to state why she thought the school was so successful at school improvement.

Our teachers are driven. We have newer teachers and even our veteran teachers are wanting to grow and learn. We are driven to set our students up for success even beyond the classroom. A healthy competitiveness amongst us and wanting the district to succeed as well. (Teacher B1)

Teacher B2 explained that they knew there needed to be changes made to help improve their school. She went on to say that there was good buy-in even with the veteran teachers. They shared the workload so it did not fall on just a few people. The Superintendent echoed what the teachers had answered. He said, "Buy in from teachers and teamwork. They had to believe in what they were attempting to do."

External Partners (EP)

All three individuals interviewed were in agreement that external partners are welcomed at the school. When asked what relationships the school has with its external partners, one teacher stated that several parents are involved with the school through the PTO and volunteer help whenever needed. The first year the school worked with its learning partner, several parents participated on school committees. Furthermore, community members are also very supportive and will help the school in any way they can. Teacher B2 stated, "The community speaks very highly of our school and staff." This statement is supported by the results of the needs assessment completed by the learning partner. The school has a lot of traditions that are very important to the community, such as a Fall Carnival, Mardi Gras Parade, and a Christmas Program.

School B communicates with its external partners in many ways. Through electronic/social media venues— both district and classroom Facebook pages – and the district

website, parental contact (Remind 101 app, notes or emails, individual phone calls, and face-to-face meetings), as well as the student information and school messaging systems. Types of information being communicated are the school's progress, the class plans for the week, independent practice that can be completed at home, what happened in class today, recognition of students for positive work and behaviors, pictures of students working on projects, and school events and other information. One teacher added, "We are always trying to connect the school to home. I tell parents to use the information sent home as a communication tool to ask about what their child did today at school." (Teacher B1)

Mission and Vision Statements (SG, IL, EP)

Both the administration and the teachers knew their school had a mission and vision statement. Teacher B1 explained that she read them before she was interviewed and that they are "umbrella" statements. She also went on to say that each year the school has a new area of focus to work on. When asked about the mission and vision statements, Teacher B2 stated,

Our mission and vision are for our students and to help them grow into productive citizens of our community. I wouldn't say I focus on it and it drives what I do, but I think the mission statement is along the same line as what my philosophy of education is and they do align.

The superintendent said the mission statement does not drive school improvement and what needs to be done. He went on to explain, "We know what we need to do. Success is what drives you."

Neither teacher knew how the mission and vision statements were created nor did they know who was involved with the process. The superintendent explained that a committee was used to write the statements. When asked if all stakeholders were involved, he said that only school personnel served on the committee.

Strategic Resource Management (RM, TL, IL, CE)

The teachers were asked what resources do you have that are most useful in your

instructional role, such as professional development, teaching supports, and curriculum materials? Some resources that were mentioned included learning how to use data, training on how to read the data results of the MAP Growth assessment, learning how to have effective professional learning communities (PLC), training from learning partner, dismissing early on Tuesdays for staff collaboration, and updating the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. When asked if there are any resources that they would like but are not receiving, only a more updated curriculum in Science was mentioned. Nonetheless, both teachers reported that they are supported and that resources have been provided to them.

The administration was asked if the district expenditures are supporting the learning goals of the district and the answer was "yes". Specifically, School B is using the Title I budget grant funds on services provided by the learning partner, Ed Direction; ELA curriculum; and a paraprofessional. Additional non-grant funds were expended to provide more paraprofessionals, a Reading Specialist, and one-to-one chromebooks. Through the learning partner the district was also able to provide professional development activities. An early dismissal one day a week was also added to allow for weekly collaboration and time to work on school improvement initiatives. Progress towards school improvement goals is determined by using student MAP Growth results and classroom data.

Decision Making (CE, IL, EP)

The teachers were asked how important decisions are made at School B. Both teachers felt the administration does a good job involving the staff in the decision making process.

Teacher B1 stated,

Admin does a really good job of putting a feeler out to get input. He will form a committee to have discussions. His door is always open to go in and share thoughts with him. He will take it back to the committee. Teacher input is heavily weighed and accepted and then he will make the decision.

Teacher B2 added that the committees consist of teachers from each grade level. This allows

for information to be gathered and reported on from each grade. When asked if there are any challenges to the current decision making process, Teacher B1 reported: "Administration uses committee members based on [their] strengths, so sometimes people may wonder why they weren't chosen for a committee." In sum, both teachers reported they feel their opinions are valued.

When making decisions, the administration uses the following decision making process. The administrator reported that he listens to his staff. He went on to explain that if he or a staff member sees a need, he will put together a committee to meet and discuss the need. The team collaborates to devise a plan that will always be based on what is best for the students. He stated, "Collaboration is key as well as everyone being on the 'same page'." In the end, the committee will share their ideas or plan with the administrator, and he will make the decision based on their input.

How often are school improvement goals and expectations communicated? (SG, IL, CE, EP)

School B administration and teachers reported three primary channels in which school improvement goals and expectations are communicated to parents. First, information was shared regarding student expectations based on the results of student assessment. Namely, at the beginning of the school year, all students take the MAP Growth benchmark. Teachers will discuss the results with each student and together they will set a goal to strive towards. The students will keep track of their own progress after each growth check and the results of each growth check are shared with the parents. At the end of the year, the annual MAP Growth progress is sent home. The second avenue of communication occurs during parent teacher conferences, where student goals and performance are shared through face-to-face communications. Lastly, information on overall school improvement efforts are shared with parents via the district Facebook page.

School improvement goals and expectations are evaluated through a needs assessment and PLC teams. Teacher B1 shared that the needs assessment committee will present each

year's data at the end of the school year. Next, the PLC teams evaluate the data to determine possible areas of concern and will also derive a plan of improvement. This is a continual process and is teacher driven. Teacher B2 nicely summarized how the process worked during the first year of school improvement under IL EMPOWER:

PLC teams were focused on MAP Growth scores. We talked about which areas in instruction needed more attention. We would try some things and then come back together to see what the data said and to see if it was making a difference.

Ensuring a Safe and Orderly Environment (SE, EP, SG)

Both the administration and teachers reported that their school is safe. The superintendent replied,

Being visible is very important. He meets the students outside as they come into the school building. At the end of the day, I walk lines of students to pick up places. The parents feel comfortable sending their kids to school.

Both teachers supported these sentiments by stating, "The superintendent makes us feel safe by being visible." While visiting School B, the researcher observed the superintendent visiting classrooms and being visible before school and during lunch.

The researcher found the students at School B are a part of the internal school community. Teacher B2 reported, "The students feel safe and a part of a community here." The administrator added that students' perceptions regarding school climate and culture are essential and are solicited when taking the *5 Essentials* survey as well as when the learning partner conducts the needs assessment. Furthermore, the school promotes a positive culture through its social worker, who visits each class once a week to teach social emotional lessons. "It helps to build a community among them (students) and a way for them to talk about their feelings", stated Teacher B2.

Is Trust Valued at Your School? (IL, CE, TL)

The teachers and administration were in agreement that trust is valued at their school.

The teachers reported that everyone has an “open door” policy and that they trust each other. When asked if administration and staff promote trust, both teachers reported in the affirmative.

Next, the administrator was asked how he builds commitment, teamwork, and enthusiasm. He reported the school is committed to teamwork. For example, through the hiring process, he searches for candidates who are team players. This collaborative spirit is the foundation of PLC teams and committees. All teachers are involved in PLC teams and are used on committees where they will make the greatest contribution. Here, the administration encourages teachers to brainstorm and collectively develop ideas and then will listen to their suggestions. Teachers exhibit leadership on PLC teams regarding specific topics such as student data analysis and curriculum revision. Teacher B1 reported that PLC teams were halted during the pandemic due to the high levels of workload that teachers were experiencing. However, she explained that teachers expressed to their administrator the desire to get PLC teams reinvigorated because they did not want student achievement to decline. The administration agreed with the teachers and reported, “You have to have buy-in from the staff to be successful and we do. Teachers are leading and implementing expectations. I also support them with what they need.”

Teacher Learning (SG, TL, IL)

Who is leading teacher learning activities? Both the teachers and the administrator reported that teacher learning is led by either the administrator, teachers, or the learning partner. They also agreed that most of the teacher learning activities are ongoing, but teachers are supported in signing up for workshops, training, or college courses as long as it aligns with school improvement efforts. The administration conducted a survey to determine what types of teacher learning activities were most beneficial. Teacher B1 reported, “Administration asked us what we needed and he supported us.” Participants mentioned utilizing multiple and diverse learning structures, such as leadership teams, PLC teams, grade level planning, peer-to-peer learning, and whole building meetings. Ongoing projects that were initiated through these

structures included training on the new curriculum (*Eureka Math & Journeys ELA*), curriculum mapping, and data analysis, while other activities were only offered one time (e.g, trauma training).

School B utilized Ed Direction as its learning partner. Its task was to determine what type of teacher learning is the most beneficial for the elementary school teachers. As a result, it led the school through the needs assessment process using the Illinois Quality Framework and the consequent school improvement plan. This was a new approach according to the administrator: “We had never conducted a needs assessment nor had we ever had a school improvement plan.” Over the past three years, Ed Direction supported School B teachers by instructing them how to effectively conduct PLC meetings, map curriculum, and analyze data as well as showing the importance of utilizing instructional strategies, grade level planning, and grade-to-grade planning.

How is Student Instruction Developed and Monitored? (IL, CE)

School B reported using the state learning standards and student data to drive instruction. Both Teachers reported that during grade level planning meetings, teachers spend a majority of the time discussing instruction. They also noted they are collaborating on instruction more between grade levels.

Teachers utilize MAP Growth benchmark data as well as formal and informal classroom assessments to monitor student achievement. “We let the data results affect the instruction”, stated Teacher B1. On Tuesday early dismissal days, PLC teams and Ed Direction analyze student data, what they make of the results, and develop an action plan to change instruction where needed. Teacher B2 reported students monitor their own growth. For example, tracking growth on their MAP assessment and multiplication facts improvement.

IL EMPOWER Learning Partner (SG, IL, CE, TL, EP)

School B selected Ed Direction as its learning partner. After completing the needs assessment and reviewing the results, four IL Quality Framework standards showed School B

as “accomplished” – culture and climate, governance, family and community connections, and student learning – and three standards were still “emerging” – continuous improvement, shared leadership, and educator and employee quality. Together the administration, teachers, and Ed Direction developed a school improvement plan for these emerging areas. Ed Direction helped the team to set smart goals, make action steps, state who is responsible for each action step, and make a timeline for completion.

Some of the recommended action steps to improve student achievement included implementing data-driven PLC teams, using MAP Growth for benchmark data, purchasing a new curriculum for ELA, and aligning curriculum through grade levels. Ed Direction was able to support the administration and teachers through training on curriculum mapping, teaching them to conduct effective PLC team meetings, providing instructional coaching to teachers and leadership coaching to administration, and teaching instructional strategies. They taught the staff how to collect student data, how to look at the data and evaluate it, and then have the collaborative conversations of how that data impacts instruction.

What role did the administration have in the school improvement process? Teacher B2 reported that the administrator formed the school improvement team, planned the meeting times and dates, and facilitated the meetings. She went on to say, “He knew we were the experts so he let us make most of the decisions. He put teams together based on people’s strengths, and he let the teachers decide what curriculum to use.” The administrator added he regularly worked with Ed Direction to plan future activities, and he was always transparent with his teachers and parents.

The teachers were asked to identify other significant factors relevant to their school’s improvement process or improvement of IL EMPOWER designation? “The staff were energized to make changes and maintain progress. Definitely a collective effort”, stated Teacher B1. She went on to explain how they learned best practices, implemented some new instructional strategies, and then used student data to determine its effectiveness. In addition, she said the

administration “did a great job pressing that it had to be a collective effort.” Teacher B2 replied, School improvement was never stressed before and now we had an end goal to work towards and it was a focus of administration. We felt we were now being supported and if there was a resource we needed, that it would be provided to us. Also, the buy-in of our staff [to the school improvement process]. This designation was not just the responsibility of the grades giving the (state) test but it became all of our responsibilities. We had a good school community that stepped up and saw that we needed to make some changes and they were very willing to do that. We were also flexible and willing to work hard.

In 2018, the state of Illinois had 115 Illinois elementary schools that received the “lowest performing” designation. It begs the question: Why do you believe your school was able to improve two or more levels while receiving the same comprehensive supports as the other schools, while 89 other schools were not successful? School B’s administrator stated there was a change in the culture when he assumed the superintendency – the staff believed they could work together to make a positive change for the students as well as bought into the school improvement efforts. When asked what building level administrative practices seemed key in improving the school at least two designations, the administrator stated, “They believe in me and believe that I truly care about them and the kids and what we are trying to do. I am here to see the kids get better and we were all working together.”

This chapter contained the information gathered from two IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois through interviews, article reviews, and observations by the researcher. The researcher interviewed administration and teachers at both schools and a summary of those interviews are reported in the following chart:

Table 3: Seven Themes and Results from School A and School B

| Themes | School A | School B |
|---|--|---|
| SG: School Vision and Goals - Setting Direction and Purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has Mission and Vision Statements -No one knew how they were developed -Needs Assessment was conducted using the IL Quality Framework -Focus was on School Improvement -Displayed Mission and Vision -Developed SIP with action plan and timelines -Revisits the plan once a month -Agendas for meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has Mission and Vision Statements -Only school personnel developed the statements according to Administration -The Mission and Vision Statements do not drive what they do -Needs Assessment was conducted using the IL Quality Framework -Developed SIP with action plan, whose responsible, and timeline -School improvement efforts are shared with the community -The three areas they are working on are continuous improvement, shared leadership, and educator and employee quality |
| RM: Strategic Resource Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Things purchased: Learning Partner AIR, Paraprofessional, IXL, and chromebooks -Reorganized placement of teachers -Administration provided what the teachers needed except in one case -Resources support learning goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Things purchased: Learning Partner Ed Direction, Paraprofessional, new ELA Curriculum, chromebooks -Teachers feel supported by Administration -Resources support learning goals -Administration supports teachers with what they need |
| IL: Instructional Leadership-Improving the Instructional Core | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Curriculum Calendars -Instructional Coaching -Put a school improvement system in place -Student Data evaluated to drive instruction -Trust -Students measuring their own growth -Used agendas for meetings -Raised the bar academically -Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Analysis of student data is driving instruction -Curriculum Mapping -Teachers work on committees to make decisions -Students keep track of their own growth -Trust is valued, Trust is promoted by leaders -Learning Standards and student data drives instruction -Grade level meetings focused on |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | | <p>instruction and more on instruction between grade levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Formal and informal assessments are being used for data -Aligning curriculum through grade levels -Used research supported strategies |
| <p>CE: Collective Efficacy - Redesigning the Organization</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Early out dismissal one day a week for collaboration time, schedule change -Student data from STAR and IXL evaluated every Monday -Building a system of school improvement that will remain in place after learning partner is gone -SIP discussions collaborated on by the entire staff -Teacher opinion is valued -Administration listens to staff concerns -Everyone is on the same team and they have buy in -Multiple forms of student data analyzed including student survey -Trust -Staff motivation *Entire staff involved *Buy in into the SIP process *Everyone is one the same page | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Driven to set students up for success -Buy in from all and work together, teamwork -Believe in what they are doing -Teachers feel supported -Early dismissal one day a week for collaboration time -Everyone is on the same page -Teachers are involved in decision making -Teacher opinion is valued and weighed heavily when making decisions -PLC teams meet to review data -School improvement is continuous and teacher driven -Trust -Teachers are leading and implementing expectations -Administration supports teachers with what they need -Administration is transparent with staff *Collective effort, buy in into SIP process *Staff believed they could work together and make positive changes for students *Teachers believe in administration and know he cares. |
| <p>TL: Teacher Learning - Developing People</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Professional Development(PD) from AIR -PD on setting SMART goals -PD on instructional strategies -Instructional and Leadership Coaching -Mix of ongoing and one time trainings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teachers feel supported by administration -PD from Ed Direction -PD on Curriculum Mapping -PD on Data Analysis |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Teachers visit each others classrooms -Made Curriculum Calendars -PD on rigor in the classrooms -PD on student engagement -Trust -Administration supporting staff -PD is led by Administration and Learning Partner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PD on PLC's and Effective Meetings -PD on Instructional Strategies -Teacher opinion is valued -Trust -PD is led by Administration, Learning Partner, and Teachers -Most training is ongoing -Instructional and Leadership Coaching -Teacher led process |
| SE: Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Security updates in the school -SEL goals -Staff reports feeling safe -Student Survey | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -All felt the school was safe -Administration is visible -Teachers stated they feel safe -Students are a part of school community and take ownership in day to day activities -Social Worker gives weekly SEL lessons -Student Survey |
| EP: Connecting with External Partners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parents involved in education through various activities -The school keeps parents informed by communicating through multiple channels -Administration listens to community concerns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Welcome parents to school -Parents involved in PTO and volunteer -Parents work on school committees when needed(early on in SIP process) -Good communication to parents through multiple channels -Student goals and progress shared with families |
| *starred items were stated in the interviews as strategies that were relevant in improving the Illinois EMPOWER designation by two or more ratings | | |

In Chapter Five, the researcher will close with an answer to the research question, a discussion of what the answer means, a summary of conclusions, suggestions for future research, and final thoughts.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to give guidance to building level administrators in southern Illinois whose elementary school earned a “lowest performing” designation from data gathered from Illinois Assessment of Readiness. The study determined school improvement practices that building administrators can use in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois that will have a positive impact on student achievement. Two elementary schools were able to raise their designations up two or more rankings from where they were in 2018 were involved in this study. Specifically, there were a total of eight participants: three administrators and two teachers from School A, and one administrator and two teachers from School B. All of the interviews were conducted in person except for one that was by phone. The data collected and presented in Chapter 4 were analyzed and will be used to summarize the findings in the following section.

The students in the two sample schools have shown academic growth, and by using the case study methodology, which included focused interviews and artifact review, the researcher sought to learn the reason(s) behind their academic improvement. This chapter includes an analysis and discussion of the study results, a summary of the findings by theme, implications for building administrators, and recommendations for further research.

Research Question:

The following research question guided the course of this study:
What building level administrative practices are present in rural IL EMPOWER elementary schools in southern Illinois that demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year?

The researcher found there to be several practices that building administration at both buildings had implemented early on in the IL EMPOWER school improvement process. For example, a needs assessment was completed in both schools, and as a result, each school

wrote a school improvement plan. The school improvement plan contained goals, action plans, who was responsible for implementation, and timelines. A part of the school improvement plan was providing enhanced professional development on topics, such as how to analyze data, how to conduct effective PLC meetings, how to map curriculum, and how to use research-based instructional strategies. In sum, both schools made significant changes in its implementation of school improvement strategies. Prior to each school receiving their initial designation, neither school focused on school improvement. Over time, the school improvement plan became a “working document” and not just placed on a shelf.

Administration in both buildings knew there had to be a designated time for teachers and staff to have discussions regarding school improvement and to analyze student data. They needed time to meet in PLC teams, grade level meetings, and committees; therefore, both schools built time into their weekly schedules to allow for collaboration, discussion, data analysis, curricular mapping, and goal setting. Overall, every meeting’s focus was on ways to improve student achievement.

The implementation of these building level practices created a culture of collaboration and, as a result, positively impacted the elementary schools in several ways. Teachers from both schools felt they had trusting relationships with their building administrators, they felt supported, they knew their opinions were valued, and they were leading and implementing expectations. Some of the noted collaborative outcomes were: full participation and buy-in of teachers into the school improvement process, a collective effort and teamwork, everyone was on the same page, and teachers believed they could work together and make positive changes. In sum, they believed in what they were doing.

Summary of the Findings and Discussion

This study revealed four key findings that focused on the administrative aspects of school improvement. Foremost, the researcher found that the money was not what made these two schools improve two or more designations; it was the practices used in the school

improvement process. The majority of the school improvement funds both schools received were used to hire the services of the required learning partner. By design, the learning partner's role primarily consisted of assisting the schools in their initial focus on school improvement, training the school collaboration teams to become more independent over time, thus enabling them to build their own school improvement system and become less reliant upon the learning partner. Overall, the data showed that building level administration could readily implement their most impactful school improvement practices with very little expense.

The next two findings – mission/vision and role of external partners – are noteworthy because of their divergence from the scholarly literature. Given the volume of research focusing on the value of mission/vision of an organization, it was surprising that these guiding principles did not play a defined role in either district's school improvement process. School B's administration even went as far to say the mission and vision statements were not the force that motivated them to do better. Yet, interestingly, he was the only person at either school who knew the history of the origin as well as the evolution of these statements and it had been several years since these statements had been revisited by either school. Even though neither school relied upon these written statements, there was still an underlying mindset in both schools that motivated both teachers/staff and students to make significant gains in academic achievement. In sum, the researcher found that an unwritten culture of student success was more impactful in the schools than an unused set of guidelines.

Next, the researcher was perplexed by the limited role played by external partners in the school improvement process. Standard #6 of the Illinois Quality Framework is Family and Community Engagement, and an indicator within the Standard is how schools involve parents and community members in the decision making process. This Standard is supported by scholarly research that shows schools who involve parents and the community in the collaboration process experience improvement in student achievement. Yet, interestingly, even though parents at both schools were involved in their child's activities and monitored their child's

academic progress, only one school initially had direct parental involvement in the school improvement process and neither continued to involve parents or community members in the process, which is inconsistent with the research.

The final major finding focuses on the contribution of the seven themes generated from the review of literature. Six of the seven themes were present in both schools during the improvement process. One theme in particular – collective efficacy and redesigning the organization - played the most significant role in improving student achievement as it was mentioned almost twice as many times as the other themes. Interestingly, the seventh theme – an orderly and safe environment – was not presented by the schools as a primary factor in improving student achievement. Both schools focused on overall security improvements (e.g., camera, metal detectors) and student safety, but did not focus on the orderliness within the classroom as it relates to learning. Lastly, it is noteworthy that the data showed that no individual theme was solely responsible for the uptick in the schools' student achievement; but rather, collectively the themes played varying roles depending upon the circumstances in each district.

Implications for Building Level Administrators

Recently, schools received their new summative designations for the first time since 2019. As a result, there will be a new cohort of schools who are in the “lowest performing” category and are about to begin their IL EMPOWER journey. The results of this study will be beneficial to the building level administrators of these elementary schools, as well as any school leader who wants to improve student achievement in their elementary building. The following strategies are the outcome of the current project:

- Complete a needs assessment
- Revisit Mission/Vision and communicate it with key stakeholders
- Write a school improvement plan with action steps, who is responsible for each action item, and a timeline

- Find time in the schedule for collaboration and school improvement work
- Develop a structure for collaboration, such as PLC teams and grade level meetings
- Provide professional development, such as how to analyze data, how to conduct effective PLC meetings, how to map curriculum, and how to use research-based instructional strategies
- Analyze student data throughout the school year
- Involve all key stakeholders in the process, build trust, support teachers, and work collectively
- Focus less on the fiscal aspect and more on the collaborative side.

Recommendations for Further Study

The researcher recommends the following topics to further the study:

1. Research that examines the remaining 24 IL EMPOWER elementary schools throughout the state of Illinois that achieved raising their designations up two or more rankings in one year to see what building level administrative practices are present.
2. Comparison of the schools in this study with the middle and high schools in southern Illinois that raised their designations up two or more rankings in one year to determine what building level administrative practices are present.
3. Research that analyzes and compares the IL EMPOWER elementary schools in Illinois that raised their designations two rankings in one year with those IL EMPOWER elementary schools in Illinois who did not raise their designation during that same timeframe.
4. Research that compares the learning partners in the state of Illinois and their success record working with IL EMPOWER schools.
5. Research to determine which building level administrative practices have the most impact on academic/school quality indicators.

6. Research to eliminate the disconnect between the Illinois Quality Framework standards and the measures used to determine school designations.

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APPENDIX A

ILLINOIS QUALITY FRAMEWORK

6/13/19

The Illinois Quality Framework is a document that includes standards, indicators, and guiding questions for diverse stakeholder groups to use in open, honest, inquiry-based conversation. These conversations set the stage for the completion of the Illinois Quality Framework Supporting Rubric.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE:

Equity and Continuous Improvement: In successful districts and schools, educational equity means that every student is provided the educational rigor, the unique academic and social emotional supports, and resources, they need to succeed. (*CCSSO Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs*)

| Standard I – Continuous Improvement |
|--|
| <p><i>In successful districts and schools, there is a collective commitment to collaboratively identify, plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, and communicate the changes necessary to continuously improve student learning.</i></p> <p><u>Purpose setting questions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is collaborative problem solving embedded into district/school practice? 2. How is planning for continuous improvement embedded into district/school practice? 3. How does the district/school support a continuous improvement model that provides equitable opportunities for all to learn? 4. What are the monitoring, accountability and follow-up measures established to address the opportunity gaps and achievement gaps that exist? |
| Indicators |
| <p>➤ <u>Indicator A</u> – Focused and Coherent Direction</p> <p><i>The district leadership team establishes a coherent and collaborative approach for improving student performance based on the established vision/goals and implements a comprehensive district continuous improvement process.</i></p> <p>➤ <u>Indicator B</u> – Processes and Structure</p> <p><i>The school(s) leadership team establishes a well-defined structure for building professional relationships and processes necessary to collaboratively engage all school-level stakeholders in actions to increase student learning through the implementation of a comprehensive school continuous improvement process.</i></p> <p>➤ <u>Indicator C</u> – Monitoring for Results</p> <p><i>The district and school leadership teams collaboratively monitor changes in practice and implement adjustments, evaluate the results of student learning for all groups of students, and communicate the progress to all stakeholders.</i></p> |

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Standard II – Culture and Climate

In order to ensure desired results of improved teaching and learning, successful districts and schools must cultivate safe and stabilized learning environments.

Purpose setting questions:

1. How is the vision for our district and schools established and communicated?
2. What is the alignment between our district/school vision and our goals?
3. How is a safe learning environment provided in schools?
4. How does our school culture provide support for effective and responsive instruction?
5. How does our district and school climate support all students and staff members?
6. What is the evidence that the district/school create learning environments that are inclusive and responsive to all students?

Indicators

➤ **Indicator A – Shared Vision and Goals**

The district and school(s) have aligned vision statements and goals that support a learning environment that is physically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally safe and conducive to learning.

➤ **Indicator B – High Expectations for All**

The school culture supports educators in practicing effective and responsive instruction to meet the needs of the whole child and promotes the celebration of district, school, and student improvement.

➤ **Indicator C – Safe and Engaging Learning Community**

The district and school climate supports the whole child and well-being of all students and personnel, contributing to an engaging and inclusive learning community.

Standard III – Shared Leadership

In successful districts and schools, leaders create and sustain organizational direction, expectations, and a system that promotes excellence, efficiency, and leadership from within.

Purpose setting questions:

1. How do members of school staff perceive the learning environment?
2. What evidence supports a positive and supportive learning environment?
3. How is student learning data used in the district and in schools?
4. How do students perceive their classroom learning environment?
5. At what level and in what ways are students involved in leadership opportunities?
6. If in a district represented by multiple races and ethnicity, what is the makeup of students in various clubs, committees, etc. and is it proportionate and representative of the student body,

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| Standard III – Shared Leadership |
|---|
| regardless of learner characteristics? |
| Indicators |
| <p>➤ <u>Indicator A – Administrative Leadership</u> <i>The administration actively models and fosters a positive learning environment in which staff members feel valued and are challenged to grow professionally.</i></p> <p>➤ <u>Indicator B – District and School Level Teams</u> <i>The district and school level teams collaborate to continuously collect, analyze, and apply student learning data from a variety of sources, including comparison and trend data about student learning, instruction, program evaluation, organizational conditions, and fiscal resources that support student learning.</i></p> <p>➤ <u>Indicator C – Teacher Leadership</u> <i>The teachers actively model and foster a positive school environment in which students are valued and are challenged to be engaged and grow.</i></p> <p>➤ <u>Indicator D – Student Leadership</u> <i>The students actively participate in leadership opportunities that develop self-direction and a sense of responsibility for improving self, school, and community.</i></p> |

| Standard IV – Governance, Management and Operations |
|---|
| <p><i>In successful districts and schools, efficient and effective governance policies and administrative procedures assure that personnel, fiscal resources, and data/technology systems promote and support student performance and school effectiveness.</i></p> <p><u>Purpose setting questions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What district/school policies, practices and procedures are in place to ensure the school's commitment to equity and diversity? 2. What are board policy and procedures relating to personnel recruitment, development, evaluation and retention? 3. What are board policy and procedures relating to equitable resource allocation? 4. How do the board and superintendent monitor continuous improvement? 5. In what ways does the staff reflect the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and economic diversity represented by the students and community? |
| Indicators |
| <p>➤ <u>Indicator A – Students</u></p> |

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Standard IV – Governance, Management and Operations

The district/school creates policies and procedures that school personnel implement and monitor to ensure an inclusive learning environment that decreases isolation, separation, and segregation for students that are diverse because of their race, culture, language, academic ability, physical ability, gender, socio-economic status, immigration status, social-emotional needs, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.

➤ **Indicator B – Personnel**

The district has school board policies and administrative procedures that provide for a comprehensive approach to recruiting, evaluating, and sustaining highly qualified personnel.

➤ **Indicator C – Equitable Resource Distribution**

The school board and superintendent work collaboratively to identify and allocate/reallocate fiscal resources needed for effective implementation of a comprehensive system of continuous improvement.

➤ **Indicator D – Data Collection and Technology Tools**

The school board and superintendent work collaboratively to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the continuous improvement process through an ongoing data collection system supported by an effective technology infrastructure.

Standard V – Educator and Employee Quality

In successful districts and schools, all personnel participate in processes of self-reflection, collaboration, and evaluation that lead to professional growth and development in order to create and maintain a high-quality learning community.

Purpose setting questions:

1. How are professional learning opportunities structured for all staff members so that the needs of all diverse learners are met?
2. How are professional learning opportunities determined that will be provided to staff members?
3. How are professional learning opportunities evaluated?
4. In what ways is collaboration embedded in practice?
5. What is the focus of staff collaboration?
6. How is educational practice evaluated?

Indicators

➤ **Indicator A – Professional Development**

All educators engage in continuous learning opportunities for professional growth designed to improve school and classroom practice as defined by the academic, physical, social, emotional, and behavioral programming needs.

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Standard V – Educator and Employee Quality

➤ **Indicator B – Professional Collaboration**

All educators collaborate on the improvement of the learning environment through the study of relevant data, problem analysis, and the implementation of strategies that improve delivery of services in all schools of the district.

➤ **Indicator C – Support Personnel Professional Development**

All support personnel engage in continuous learning opportunities for professional growth designed to improve professional performance.

➤ **Indicator D – Evaluation, Feedback, and Support**

All personnel participate in a comprehensive evaluation process that utilizes multiple interactive communication tools to facilitate self-reflection and inform the process of professional growth.

Standard VI – Family and Community Engagement

In successful districts and schools, stakeholders have significant opportunities to develop, implement and plan parent involvement practices to have ongoing communication regarding student physical, social, emotional, behavioral, (linguistic, if applicable) and academic growth.

Purpose setting questions:

1. How are primary caregivers and community stakeholders involved with the educational process?
2. How does the district/school communicate and collaborate with primary caregivers and community stakeholders?

Indicators

➤ **Indicator A – School-to-Home Connections**

District/school personnel and primary caregivers engage in regular communication to provide mutual supports and guidance between home and school for all aspects of student learning.

➤ **Indicator B – Student Personal Development**

The district and school leverage existing resources to provide a coordinated system of support for the whole child.

➤ **Indicator C – Student Advocates**

Educators communicate regularly with primary caregivers and various community agencies and encourage them to participate as active partners in the development of a coordinated system to address the needs of the whole child.

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Standard VII – Student and Learning Development

In successful districts and schools, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are monitored and adjusted systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning, an examination of professional practice, and analysis of learning conditions to continuously improve student growth.

Purpose setting questions:

1. How do districts/schools plan for instruction? How do districts/schools ensure an inclusive and broad curriculum?
2. What evidence do districts/schools have for alignment of instruction (vertical, horizontal and with standards/frameworks)?
3. To what extent is there alignment among programs (i.e. special education, English learners, etc.)?
4. What supports does a district/school provide for instructional planning?
5. How does the district/school evaluate the effectiveness of our instructional environment?
6. How does the district/school meet the needs of every student (including various ethnicities, linguistic abilities, etc.)?
7. How does the district/school's evaluation system support effective instruction for every student?

Indicators

➤ **Indicator A – Instructional Planning and Preparation**

Instructional staff and district/school leadership ensure that instructional planning is based on the district's curriculum as aligned with established learning standards and as supported by appropriate resources, funding sources, program and professional development.

➤ **Indicator B – Classroom Environment**

Instructional staff and district/school leadership collaborate to provide an instructional environment that equitably engages all students regardless of characteristics, native/home language, and educational needs by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of the whole child and empower students to share responsibility for their learning.

➤ **Indicator C – Delivery of Instruction**

Instructional staff, supported by district/school leadership, utilize instruction, evaluation, and assessment strategies that are informed by research to continuously monitor instruction, adjusting to the needs of the whole child.

➤ **Indicator D – Professional Responsibilities**

Instructional staff and district/school leadership collaboratively monitor the teacher evaluation system to ensure consistent implementation that supports the work of the district/school to improve teaching and learning.

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT LETTER

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear _____:

My name is Tammy Beckham. I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.

The researcher is asking you to participate in the research study because you were an employee at one of the two schools being studied during the 2018 -2019 school year. The purpose of my study is to determine school improvement leadership practices that are present in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois that have demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year. People in this study are employed at either school A or B. The minimum age of participation is 18 years of age.

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, it will take approximately sixty minutes of your time. You will participate in an interview at an agreed upon time. The interview will take place at your school in the conference room or other designated area.

If you participate in this study the main risk is a breach of confidentiality. The researcher will make every effort to ensure confidentiality. There are no other expected risks to participate in this study. If you choose not to participate or withdraw you will bear no penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, let the researcher know in writing by emailing the researcher at tammy.beckham@siu.edu. Any information previously collected will be destroyed immediately.

The benefits of being in this study are minimal. This study may help to show what school improvement leadership strategies are present in rural southern Illinois elementary IL EMPOWER schools that have demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report that is published, the researcher will make every effort to ensure your identity is kept confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file. Your identity will remain a pseudonym in any publications. You will be assigned a random number. The code listing and de-identified data will be kept in separate and secure locations. The researcher and supervising professor, Dr. Colwell, will have access to the code list and gathered data. Three years after the completion of the study, the code list will be destroyed. The researcher will take reasonable steps to protect your identity.

Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr. Brad Colwell, School of Education, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709, 618-536-4434, bcolwell@siu.edu.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please email or call me using the following contact information. Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this research.

Tammy Beckham
618-214-0863

School of Education
tammy.beckham@siu.edu

Graduate Student

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL LEVEL PERSONNEL AND ADMINISTRATION

Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel

Question Alignment Key with Themes

| | |
|---|--|
| SG School Vision/Goal Setting | RM Strategic Resource Management |
| IL Instructional Leadership-Improving the Instructional Core | CE Collective Efficacy-Redesigning the Organization |
| TL Teacher Learning-Developing People | SE Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment |
| EP Connecting with External Partners | |

Background Questions:

1. What is your position?
 - a. Describe your history with the school?
 - b. What motivates you in your current role?

2. Why is your school successful in terms of school improvement?

Specific Questions:

3. Are external partners, such as parents and community members, welcomed at the school? (EP)
 - a. What relationships does the school have with its external partners?
 - b. How does the school communicate with its external partners?
 - c. What types of information is being communicated to external partners?

4. A mission statement states the why of an organization. The vision identifies how the organization will achieve the mission. Are you familiar with the district's and or school mission and vision? (SG, IL)
 - a. Is there a school mission statement? If so, what is it? If not, is there an implied school mission?
 - b. Is there a school vision statement? If so, what is it? If not, is there an implied vision for the school?
 - c. How do the mission and vision impact your work?

5. Often schools involve stakeholders in creating the mission and vision of the school. (SG, EP)
 - a. Who helped create your school's mission and vision?
 - b. Were you involved in the process or do you know of someone who was involved in shaping the mission and vision?

- c. Describe the process used in developing the mission and vision. Was it done collaboratively?
6. What resources do you have that are most useful in your instructional role? For example, professional development, teaching supports, curriculum materials? Are there any resources that you would like but are not receiving? (RM, TL)
7. How are important decisions made in your school? (CE, IL, EP)
 - a. What challenges do you face when making important decisions?
 - b. Describe a recent example of a decision and how you were included or not in the decision making process.
 - c. What is your role in the decision making process?
 - d. Do you feel your opinion is valued?
8. How often are school improvement goals and expectations communicated? (SG, IL, CE, EP)
 - a. How are they evaluated? Can you provide an example?
 - b. Is there an avenue for evaluating goals in the school? Describe the avenue.
 - c. Are needs assessments completed to drive goal making?
9. Is an orderly and safe environment prevalent at your school? To what degree? (SE, EP, SG)
 - a. How are expectations of an orderly and safe environment communicated to the school community?
 - b. Do students feel they are a part of the school community? If so, how are they engaged?
 - c. What are some examples of policies or practices that promote an orderly and safe environment? For example, discipline, social work or counseling.
10. Is trust included as a value in your school? How is it promoted by leaders and staff? (IL, CE)
11. How much time is dedicated to teacher learning? (SG, TL, IL)
 - a. Who leads teacher learning activities?
 - b. Is it a one time learning activity or is it ongoing?
 - c. How is it determined what types of teacher learning activities are the most beneficial?
 - d. What types of teacher learning activities has your school participated in during the last three years?
12. How is student instruction developed and monitored at your school? Please discuss how: (IL, CE)
 - a. What are the expectations for student learning?
 - b. How are expectations communicated to students, parents, staff, and community?
 - c. How is student instruction monitored?
 - d. What data drives student instruction? How is the data analyzed?
 - e. Who monitors student instruction? Is it an individual or a team?

13. Which Learning Partner did your school choose to work with while completing the IL EMPOWER school improvement process? (SG, IL, CE, TL, EP)

- a. Which of the seven areas of the Illinois Quality Framework did your needs assessment demonstrate the need for improvement? Which ones did your school choose to focus on?
- b. What actions were used to improve in those areas?
- c. How was student achievement measured in those identified areas?
- d. What role did your administration have in the school improvement process?

14. Are there any other significant factors to mention relevant to your schools improvement process or improvement of IL EMPOWER designation?

Interview Protocol for School Level Administration

Question Alignment Key with Themes

| | |
|---|--|
| SG School Vision/Goal Setting | RM Strategic Resource Management |
| IL Instructional Leadership-Improving the Instructional Core | CE Collective Efficacy-Redesigning the Organization |
| TL Teacher Learning-Developing People | SE Ensuring an Orderly and Safe Environment |
| EP Connecting with External Partners | |

Background Questions:

1. What is your position?
 - a. Describe your history with the school?
 - b. What motivates you in your current role in regard to faculty, staff, and students?
2. Why is your school successful in terms of school improvement?

Specific Questions:

3. Are external partners, such as parents and community members, welcomed at the school?
(EP)
 - a. What relationships does the school have with its external partners?
 - b. How does the school communicate with its external partners?
 - c. What types of information is being communicated to external partners?
4. I was able to review the school's mission statement. (SG, IL)
 - a. What is the essence of your school's mission statement? (The reason for existence.)
 - b. Who helped create your school's mission statement?
5. The vision identifies how the organization will achieve the mission. It can also be the purpose of the organization. The goals to achieve the mission. (SG, IL, EP)
 - a. What is your school's vision?
 - b. What is the school doing to improve student achievement?
 - c. How are the mission and vision communicated to all stakeholders?
6. Often schools involve stakeholders in creating the mission and vision of the school. (SG, EP)
 - a. Who helped create your school's vision?
 - b. Were you involved in the process or do you know of someone who was involved in shaping the vision?
 - c. Describe the process used in developing the vision? Was it done collaboratively?

7. Resource Management: Are district expenditures supporting the learning goals of the district? (RM, TL, IL, CE)
- If so, what resources are being used in instructional roles? For example, professional development, teaching supports, curriculum materials?
 - Is the school's student learning time, teacher schedules, and placement of employees in line with the district's school improvement goals and meeting the needs of the district?
 - How do you evaluate your allocation of funds towards school improvement efforts?
 - How were the school's school improvement grant funds used?
8. How are important decisions made in your school? (CE, IL, EP)
- What challenges do you face when making important decisions?
 - Describe a recent example of a decision and who was included in the decision making process?
9. How often are school improvement goals and expectations communicated? (SG, IL, CE, EP)
- How are they evaluated? Can you provide an example?
 - Is there an avenue for evaluating goals in the school? Describe the avenue.
 - Are needs assessments completed to drive goal making? Describe.
 - Are your goals linked to the mission and vision? Describe how.
10. Is an orderly and safe environment prevalent at your school? To what degree? (SE, EP, SG)
- How are expectations of an orderly and safe environment communicated to the school community?
 - Do students feel they are a part of the school community? If so, how are they engaged?
 - What are some examples of policies or practices that promote an orderly and safe environment? For example, discipline, social work or counseling.
11. Is trust included as a value in your school? How is it promoted by leaders and staff? (IL, TL, CE)
- How do you build commitment, teamwork, and enthusiasm?
 - How do you motivate others?
 - Who other than you takes the lead on implementing expectations? How?
12. How much time is dedicated to teacher learning? (SG, TL, IL)
- Who leads the teacher learning?
 - Is it a one time learning activity or is it ongoing?
 - How is it determined what types of teacher learning are the most beneficial?
 - What types of teacher learning activities has your school participated in during the last three years?
13. How is student instruction developed and monitored at your school? Please discuss how: (IL, CE)
- What are the expectations for student learning?
 - How are expectations communicated to students, parents, staff, and community?
 - How is student instruction monitored?

- d. What data drives student instruction? How is the data analyzed?
- e. Who monitors student instruction? Is it an individual or a team?

School Improvement

14. Which Learning Partner did your school choose to work with while completing the IL EMPOWER school improvement process? (SG, IL, CE, TL, EP)

- a. Which of the seven areas of the Illinois Quality Framework did your needs assessment demonstrate the need for improvement? Which ones did your school choose to focus on?
- b. What actions were used to improve in those areas?
- c. How was student achievement measured in those identified areas?
- d. What role did you have in the school improvement process?
- e. What role did your Learning Partner play in the school improvement process?
- f. What role did your Support Manager play in the school improvement process?

15. In 2018, the state of Illinois had 115 Illinois elementary schools that received the “lowest performing” designation. Why do you believe your school was able to improve two or more levels while receiving the same comprehensive supports as the other schools, while 89 other schools were not successful?

16. Based on your experience, what building level administrative practices seemed key in improving your school at least two designations?

17. Are there any other significant factors to mention relevant to your schools improvement process or improvement of IL EMPOWER designation?

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FOR AV TAPING

CONSENT FOR AV TAPING

Consent to Participate in Research

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project conducted by Tammy Beckham, graduate student in the School of Education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

I understand the purpose of my study is to determine school improvement leadership practices that are present in IL EMPOWER elementary schools in rural southern Illinois that have demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year. The minimum age of participation is 18 years of age.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and may refuse to answer any question without penalty. I may skip any question I choose. I am also informed that my participation will last for sixty minutes. Participants should not use the names of non participants during the interview to protect their privacy. The audio recorder will be turned on right before the first question is asked and turned off after the last question is answered.

I understand that my responses to the questions will be audio recorded, and that these audio files will be transcribed/stored and kept until the completion of the program in a locked file cabinet. The researcher will meet the federal requirements and these audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of three years. The researcher will be allowed to hear the recordings. If the participant refuses to be recorded, the researcher will only take field notes during the interview.

If you participate in this study the main risk is a breach of confidentiality. The researcher will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity. There are no other expected risks to participate in this study. The benefits of being in this study are minimal. This study may help to show what school improvement leadership strategies are present in rural southern Illinois elementary IL EMPOWER schools that have demonstrated improvement of two or more ratings in one year.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, let the researcher know in writing by emailing the researcher at tammy.beckham@siu.edu. Any information previously collected will be destroyed immediately.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to Tammy Beckham, School of Education, 618-214-0863, tammy.beckham@siu.edu or her advisor Dr. Brad Colwell, School of Education, 618-536-4434, bcolwell@siu.edu.

I have read the material above, and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers. I realize that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time.

"I agree _____ I disagree _____ to participate in this activity and know that my responses will be audio recorded."

"I agree _____ I disagree _____ to participate and have my responses quoted directly, but using a pseudonym."

Participant Signature and Date

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Institutional Review Board Chair, Office of Research Compliance, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone 618-453-4534. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu.

VITA

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