Principal Succession: Lost in the Shuffle

by

Olivia Amador-Valerio

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of

San Diego State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

January 20, 2016
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Dissertation of

Dr. Olivia Amador-Valerio

Principal Succession: Lost in the Shuffle

Douglas Fisher, Chair
Department of Educational Leadership

Nancy Frey
Department of Educational Leadership

John Nelson
Department of Educational Leadership

1/20/2016
Approval Date
ABSTRACT

The role of the school principal is vital to a school’s overall success, and the need to appoint and support excellent educational leaders is critical. School districts continually face principal succession, and the replacement of a principal relies on a selection and recruitment process in identifying a candidate who reflects the best fit, at the right time, for the school. This research investigated the experiences associated with the decision-making process by superintendents when looking to fill a principal vacancy and the experiences of newly appointed or reassigned principals who completed their first year. The intent was to identify common factors associated with the first year experience and structures in place to support principals during their transition.

This qualitative study’s primary data collection was through in-depth interviews with participants. The research sample included a total of three superintendents, three Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources, and nine newly appointed or reassigned principals in urban, or suburban, Southern California public schools.

This study intended to further our understanding of the experiences of newly appointed or reassigned principals during their transition year. Future research in this area might encourage superintendents to approach principal succession planning from a formative perspective inclusive of discussions about replacement plans during performance evaluations. A principal succession plan focused on the transition in leadership, and inclusive of both the predecessor and successor intentional interactions, creates the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue that may have a positive impact on a school and increase the likelihood of successor success.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Problem.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Research and Scholarship.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful Succession Planning.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Principal Reassignments.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing the Likelihood of Successor Success.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Continuity and Principal Succession</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapping Into the Principal Pipeline.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for Principal Selection.</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Teacher Sense-Making Over Time on Postsuccession Stages</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Shadowing Models</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Decision Points</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Factors Used in Principal Selection and Some Related Measuring Devices</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent Backgrounds</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>Candidate Selection Criteria</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>Interview Phases</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>Principal Mentoring Structures</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>Principal Pipeline</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>Candidate Leadership Development</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 12</td>
<td>Reason for Appointment or Reassignment</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 13</td>
<td>Predecessor Communication</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the participants in this study who shared personal experiences and thoughts about the work of a school principal. To the superintendents who position leaders to fulfill their purpose, stay connected. To the principals, continue to get the best out of your teachers, and thank you for making a difference in your school communities.

Words cannot express how much I depended on the love, encouragement, and support of my colleagues who, through this journey, became family: Leticia, Glendora, and Carmen. The three of you inspired me to believe in myself to achieve my lifelong goal. To my extended family, Mandela Cohort: we arrived as individuals and evolved into a family unit of collective minds grounded on the work of the heart.

To the educational leadership faculty: thank you for exemplifying all that is good about our field. Your influence and legacy will live on within the hearts and minds of the next generation of doctoral leaders, prepared to search for our truth.
First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this work to my family, whose love and encouragement supported me throughout the pursuit of this lifelong goal. To my children, Gabriel and David, who inspired me through their smiles, hugs, and curiosity that motivated me to push forward throughout this journey.

To my principal colleagues, the focus of the study was inspired by your dedication of service to all members of a school community. The life of a principal holds challenges that often go unnoticed and worked through independently with love in order to improve the lives of students. Every struggle is your strength, and I commend those who stick with it and make a difference in every life touched through the service by our school principals.

And finally, to my mentor and coach whose suggestion to continue my journey of learning has forever changed me. I thank you for sharing the experience with me and inspiring me to dream big, put forth the effort, and make a difference. “Learn the basics, and the wins will come.” Those words will forever remain in my heart as my focus was clarified and my purpose was enhanced. There is no looking back, and the future is full of limitless possibilities. Stay motivated.
CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

As principal positions become available, district superintendents are faced with the challenge of hiring highly qualified candidates to fill those vacancies. In the majority of cases, the final recommendation is made by the superintendent who then presents it to the governing board for approval. Relying on a selection and recruitment process in identifying the candidate who reflects the best fit, at the right time, for the school, is at the core of the decision-making process. How then do superintendents arrange for the selection and recruitment process to occur and who is invited to participate? If the principal is critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the appointment or reassignment is influenced by the predecessor’s administration, what systematic and intentional succession plan is in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurs with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?

In an era of increased pressure to meet the mandates of accountability, finding a skillful school leader possessing the necessary expertise for the improvement process is critical. Research strongly supports that the leadership of the school principal has a direct impact on the climate of the school and, in turn, on student achievement (Marks & Nance, 2007; Norton, 2003; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2005). When schools experience high levels of academic success, this is due in large part to the capabilities of the school principal. Recognizing this factor, little attention has been paid to principal succession planning as a management system directly impacting the school improvement process. As more is understood about the influence of the school administrator and its impact on student achievement and the school’s effectiveness, examining the systems for the recruitment and selection of a skilled school principal, and the postappointment support provided for
continuous leadership development is needed. Additionally, more research as to how and why school principals are selected and assigned to vacant positions is necessary to proactively identify, recommend, and appoint highly qualified candidates that fit the needs of the school. To explore the decision-making process district superintendents use when recommending school principals, Hooker (2000) interviewed seven superintendents from a variety of school districts and noted that although a thoughtful process was used to find and recommend the right candidate for vacancies, each differed in the deregulated criteria for the selection. Hooker found the following:

Even though the recruitment and selection of building level administrators involve numerous real-world decisions in organizational context, there was little in the literature on how and why building level administrators are recruited and selected for particular positions. There are very few published studies of any kin on recruitment and selection of building level administrators and not from an organizational perspective. (p. 183)

During the selection process of a school leader, a clear set of expectations connected to the needs of the school, and one that considers the history and traditions established with the predecessor, is an indispensable component throughout the process of filling a vacancy. Facing the challenge of finding the right candidate to recommend in a timely manner, district superintendents may find themselves restricted due to the pressures presented by community members, school staff, governing boards, and students. The need for a systematic succession plan that identifies how to plan for, develop, and retain future school leaders, is often absent and may contribute to high turnover rates of principals who leave the position in pursuit of other roles. In the absence of a methodical
plan for principal selection and reassignments, appointments of an unsuitable candidate may negatively impact a school organization. Recognizing that these circumstances may have an adverse effect on the efficacy of a school raises the question, why are school districts lacking a comprehensive principal succession plan?

In the absence of a replacement plan for principal vacancies, changes in leadership may unintentionally obstruct school systems and have an unfavorable impact on the current organizational structure. Succession planning for school leadership is needed to recruit skilled candidates, prepare and develop leadership skills for the change process, and retain effective individuals who can lead a school on the path of success. A shortage of qualified candidates is a concern school districts face when challenged to fill vacancies that occur due to retirements, resignations, or promotions to central office positions. It is also important to recognize that the increasing demands upon the work life of a school principal may contribute to the high levels of turnover rates resulting in fewer individuals attracted to and pursuing the principalship. A succession plan that includes a system for mentoring and coaching to further develop leadership skills for administrators improves relationships with colleagues, increases job satisfaction, and leads to greater organizational commitment for continued professional growth under the leadership of the current administrator. Mentoring school leaders is a more complex task than it may seem. Without appropriate support, principals can experience stress and burnout and leave the profession entirely (Norton, 2003).

A school principal creates and supports a learning culture of continuous problem solving and improvement to construct an environment where all students learn and the achievement gap is closed. A systematic succession plan that incorporates the
recruitment of potential candidates, a selection process focused on the real complex issues found in the leadership role, and a system of support once the principal transition occurs is necessary to ensure that goals of the school reform plans are met (Bengtson, Zepeda, & Parylo, 2013; Marks & Nance, 2007).

The reality of the school leadership position is multi-dimensional, attached with time constraints linked to governing policies and limited resources in need of sound management. An experienced and competent leader establishes structures to work towards meeting reform outcomes; however, a leader lacking the experience will need a system of support to grow the necessary skills over time, and with the least disruptions to the current systems in place. How then do school districts arrange for a continuous system of leadership support to build capacity and ensure the efficacious implementation of school improvement plans in the midst of complex and demanding leadership roles?

**Research Problem**

The current state of the principal selection process rests solely on the decisions and recommendations made by district superintendents to governing boards. Research shows limited studies on the principal succession experience that describes planning, recruitment, leadership development, mentoring and coaching, and retention (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Jones & Webber, 2001; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2005). There is a scarce body of knowledge in regard to principal succession planning as a dynamic process involving the actions of projecting leadership vacancies, establishing leadership sustainability systems, and succession planning. Furthermore, less research is available about the participation of the predecessor during the change process and the impact it has during the principal replacement event. It is important to recognize that each element in a
A well-developed succession plan contributes to the overall effectiveness of leadership success and helps to ensure future organizational stability. A comprehensive leadership succession plan is a pivotal event in the life on an organization. When approached purposefully, it can infuse vitality into the organization.

At times, principals are appointed to change the status quo, to lead a reform and create discontinuity in order to move the school in a new and different direction from his or her predecessors. In Barker’s (2006) research, leadership succession was observed as an underestimated aspect in the school improvement process. She maintained that successful transition planning from one school principal to another was a critical but often overlooked dimension of manageable school improvements. Furthermore, “Leadership succession at all levels was, therefore, an underestimated dimension in school improvement that provides an important opportunity to refresh an established culture and mission” (Barker, 2006, p. 290). Therefore, a sound succession plan was necessary to assure that sustained school improvements over long periods of time are carefully planned out and achieved.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study research was to gain an understanding of principal succession, planned or unplanned, and the impact the appointment or reassignment may have on a school system. In the absence of a plan, a change in leadership may create instability because it alters the lines of communication, affects decision making, and disturbs the equilibrium of the system as a whole. Planning for the transition of a school leader in a purposeful manner that includes predecessor engagement may help the new leader transition more effectively. Through the process of succession planning, newly
appointed administrators can begin the process of socialization into the role with minimal
disruption to the system in place, thus contributing value to the organization.

The focus during principal appointments or reassignment sought to consider how
to engage the predecessor in order to support a successful shift in power and positively
impact the expected future changes within the school system. When examining how an
organization actively seeks and recruits school leaders skilled in supporting district
initiatives embedded in improvement plans, does a relationship exist between qualified
principal candidates and the presence of a written succession plan in district policies?

Research Questions

Although changes in leadership, associated with changes in the organizational
structure as a reform measure, may be initiated as a process to increase a school’s
effectiveness, in the absence of a comprehensive principal succession plan, these changes
may inadvertently hinder the school improvement process and impact the organizational
structure in adverse ways. What leadership development structures exist for the
identification and development of future talent? What role does the predecessor represent
during replacement planning? To what extent do district leaders support principals
during the first year of the appointment or reassignment? To uncover answers to these
questions, the focus of the study was grounded on a series of questions intended to expose
the truth about principal appointments and reassignments through the perspective of
cabinet members in leadership roles and the perceptions of lived experiences by
principals during their first year in the new appointment. The research questions were as
follows:
1. If the principal is critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the appointment or reassignment is influenced by the predecessor’s administration, what succession plan was in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurs with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?

2. Many school organizations lack a systemic method for principal selection that may ultimately lead to a recommendation of an unsuitable candidate, thus negatively impacting a school organization; why then are school districts lacking a principal succession plan?

3. When examining how an organization actively seeks and recruits competent school leaders skilled in supporting district initiatives embedded in improvement plans, how does succession planning fit into an organization’s strategic plan?

4. How do school districts arrange for a continuous system of leadership support to build capacity and ensure a successor success?

The premise of the study was to investigate the impact the absence of a principal succession plan may have and how the changes in leadership may inadvertently hinder the school improvement process and impact the organizational structure in adverse ways.

**Relevant Research and Scholarship**

Examination of the literature included in this research study focused on three main areas: succession planning, leadership development, and successor success. The appointment of a new leader inherently creates a disruption to ongoing working practices established under the predecessor’s administration. To examine the key issues and experiences of school leaders undergoing transitions into new positions, an assumption of
the considerations a superintendent may focus on was a guide to identify focal points in
determining how a principal reassignment was worked. Learning about the moves during
the decision-making process by superintendents to identify school principal candidates for
vacancies was embedded in a multivariate succession plan connected to the recruitment
process.

Additionally, effective principal succession planning is dependent on the skillful
facilitation of powerful relationships found within the many dimensions of a school’s
culture and organization. Historically, school districts have relied on changes in school
leadership as a means to provide professional growth opportunities for administrators and
as an opportunity to rejuvenate school communities. To challenge this conception, Jones
and Webber (2001) recommended the need to recognize that principal succession was a
complex process that affects all members of a school organization. The reassignment of a
principal should not be viewed as a single event, but instead as a series of events that are
closely intertwined and at the core of school performance. Increasing the scope of the
principal selection by considering the impact such a change may incur, a well delineated
transition plan was needed in order to minimize any potential disruption to established
school practices and teams. Additionally, Jones and Webber emphasized that “principal
succession cannot be viewed as a principal-centered event” (p. 12). Organizations must
find ways to involve school communities when looking to fill vacancies in order to
empower the voices of all stakeholders. A plan that includes a component to allow the
incoming principal to work closely with the outgoing principal will reassure the school
community that the change was carefully planned and supportive of the existing school
culture (Fauske & Ogawa, 1987).
Most principals play little to no role in the selection of their successor or in the transition process from one leader to another. Moreover, principals rarely think about their replacement or consider the systems in place to ensure for a smooth transition should a change in leadership occur. To better understand the thoughts and perceptions by staff about the experience of a principal reassignment, Hart (1988) documented her own experience and included how the change was perceived by her staff at her new appointment. In her study, she focused on staff behaviors and identified variables such as change in leadership creates. Hart concluded, “This study provides a personal glimpse into ways successors can enhance their acceptance and set the stage for an effective administration” (p. 350). Considering a multitude of variables to successfully plan for a principal reassignment was needed by school organizations. Recognizing the need to establish a structure that supports the incoming principal and concentrates on establishing relationships during the change process involves a thoughtful plan that could be enhanced with predecessor engagement. In most principal succession experiences, predecessor participation is overlooked.

School effectiveness, school climate, and student achievement depend to a great extent on the quality of the school principal. The pressures and complexities found in the work of a school principal oftentimes contributes to the reasons people leave the position altogether. Given the frequent turnover of school administrators, Zimmerman (2007) advised that “districts plan for leadership succession by anticipating the critical support that new school leaders will require to be more successful” (p. 42). Having a plan for successor success will ensure that as newly appointed leaders develop the essential skills
to move a school forward, grow in efficacy, and thus ensuring the future success of the organization.

Leadership succession planning requires responding to and forecasting future vacancies, identifying recruitment and selection procedures, and implementing induction programs to support and retain effective leaders at the postappointment or reassignment phase. Ryan and Gallo (2011) stated:

The time was opportune for school boards to evaluate and assess their current practices related to succession planning, recruitment and selection, and induction program to ensure that current and aspiring leaders are supported and encouraged to meet the leadership challenges of the future. (p. 149)

As the demands for higher achievement policies emerge, skillful leadership was needed by members within the administration realm to ensure high quality learning experiences for all students. In the absence of a succession plan, a school districts organization’s strategic plan may look at and adopt a plan similar to those run by companies in the business world. The need to identify and develop a plan to prepare for future vacancies and maintain the potency of a school district will ensure a strong pool of candidates was available and ensuring future success. Considering the impact a change in leadership presents in the business world, Lamoureux, Campbell, and Smith (2009) found the following: “Effective succession management enables companies to react quickly to change and endure difficult time. At its best, succession management allows a company to seamlessly merge its employees’ capabilities and career aspirations with the company’s business strategy and talent needs (p. 3).”
A principal can make a difference where and when it counts most. The absence of a thoughtful and methodical principal succession plan may result in the loss of achievement gains from the exiting leader leaving the incoming leader without proper support for future success (Hargreaves, 2005; Hooker, 2000; Miskel & Owens, 1983; Ogawa, 1991). A need for leadership continuity is significant to fortify future success in the school reform process (Cocklin & Wilkinson, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009). To examine factors associated with achieving strong levels of retention among principals, Peters (2011) stated, “Districts need to be fully invested in the development and support of school leaders to minimize discontinuity and upheaval, as well as frustration and burnout” (pp. 78-79). Dynamic principal succession planning needs to be an integral part of a school’s improvement plan and part of the district’s expectations. Sustained leadership over time observed as a component of the school improvement process requires that principals be given the time to develop the skills to lead schools to higher levels of achievement (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Jones & Webber, 2001; Norton, 2003).

In the face of school leadership shortages and in considering long-term sustainability, school organizations must encourage tapping among the brightest and best teacher leaders who aspire towards a career in educational leadership. By doing so, this will create a pathway for skilled candidates looking to take on the added responsibility of a school principal (Fink, 2011). Instilling a system for leadership development of aspiring principals prepares them to meet the high demands of the principalship and will ensure the on-going legacy of effective leadership among the organization. Increasing the supply of successors at a time when teacher perceptions about the role of the principal is
shifting requires careful planning embedded in a system of calculated support (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Kim, 2010; Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011; Rhodes & Brundett, 2005).

As research further shows the need for highly qualified individuals to assume leadership roles (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012), was there a relationship between the degree to which districts encourage the development of aspiring principals and the shortage of well-qualified principal candidates? In an executive report on succession management, Lamoureux and colleagues (2009) outlined the need for companies to include a plan addressing management shifts in strategic plans. The authors noted that “succession management was a strategic process that minimizes leadership gaps for critical positions and provides opportunities for top talent to develop the skills necessary for future roles” (p. 3). Placing a value on strategic plans that include a succession component was critical at a time of widespread school principal shortages. Furthermore, Kim (2010) stated, “SP&M (Succession Plan & Management) was proactive and attempts to ensure the continuity of leadership by cultivating talent from within the organization through planned developmental activities” (p. 6).

Methodology

To approach the understanding of principal succession and the selection and retention systems utilized by district central office administrators, the researcher employed the qualitative tradition of a case study. Case study research was useful as described by Creswell (2013) when the researcher wanted to understand real-life cases that are in progress to gather accurate information not lost by time. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with central office administrators; Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources, and newly
appointed or reassigned school principals who recently completed their first year in their assignment. The participants were employed in urban and suburban districts in Southern California. To examine the perceptions about principal succession plans and the impact, the perspective of cabinet members and principal experiences were compared in the study.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with every study, this investigation had a number of limitations. First, the pool of participants was limited to urban or suburban Southern California districts. As a result, the findings differed in different school systems and were influenced by current succession practices in place. Secondly, the data were obtained exclusively through semi-structured interviews of superintendents, Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources, and principals, and relied on an honest account of their lived and believed experiences. The findings, therefore, are geographically bound to the accounts shared during the interview process. Lastly, this study focused on the perceptions and perspectives of district leaders about succession planning and its impact, and represents their ideal state rather than the actual state of actions within their system.

**Significance of the Study**

A well-designed principal succession plan can ultimately minimize disruptions that a change in leadership may cause. Succession planning may also be used to develop and maintain strong leadership as the organization adapts to changes in the system, prepares for an unexpected vacancy, and ensures that a cadre of viable home-grown candidate pool is available, enabling it to function at a high level of efficiency. Moreover, the constant change of principals due to ineffective performance by the leader
may negatively impact the efficiency and functioning of a school team during the school reform process. To minimize instability such changes in leadership creates, districts need a plan for replacing outgoing leaders with minimal upheaval as possible (Fink & Brayman, 2006). In addition, if a change in leadership is approached through the lens of a long term placement, more attention needs to be paid to a leadership succession plan that includes leadership development through mentoring structures to secure successor success. By anticipating the critical support that the new school leader needs to ensure a successful transition in administration, planning requires a clear vision of where the organization should be and what steps are necessary to get there.

Leadership succession is entrenched within a larger plan that strategically and consistently considers the future needs of the organization. Succession planning and succession management appear less well-developed and are a cause for concern at both national and local levels (Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009). Leadership talent identification and the coordinated effort of all stakeholders from department heads, cabinet members, and site level principals are needed to sustain the vitality of the organization when changes in leadership occur. Long-term planning becomes a mindset of future leadership development. It is in the best interest of any organization to begin thinking about replacements and develop a succession plan to ensure a sound transition that supports and maintains school effectiveness. A succession plan that identifies the selection process and contains a system of support during the transition is lacking and contributes to constant turnover that may be detrimental to the school organization. Principal succession planning is an effort to guarantee high quality leadership continuity for the organization at large. It involves thinking about the current systems in place and
the people working within the established school culture in the district. Identifying, developing, and supporting highly qualified individuals who are capable of functioning strategically within the complexities of the principalship will better prepare them to handle the anticipated and unanticipated undertakings inherently found in the position.
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One of the most significant events in the life of a school is when it undergoes a change in leadership. In the absence of a succession plan, principal reassignments may negatively affect a school’s organizational structure and impact student achievement outcomes. As the pressure to increase student achievement rises, principals are often assigned to new positions as a reform measure to increase the effectiveness of failing schools. Such practices generate questions about the decision-making process utilized and what, if any, steps are taken to obtain school community input. To further explore the process utilized during a principal reassignment, and the impact such a change had on a school system, Ogawa (1991) conducted a qualitative data analysis employing standard field methods to investigate how teachers made sense of the succession of their principal. He concluded, “When a principal was reassigned, the school community has a general expectation that the succession will bring change” (p. 57). Although changes in leadership, associated with changes in the organizational structure as a reform measure, may be initiated as a means to increase a school’s effectiveness, in the absence of a principal succession plan, these changes may inadvertently hinder the school improvement process and impact the organizational structure in adverse ways.

Principal transitions present problems or challenges that may upset school teams. To investigate the impact of principal reassignments and how such a change influences school teams focused on restructuring, Fink and Brayman (2006) conducted open-ended interviews of 20 present and past principals of four schools. They examined responses to identify in which ways social forces shaped each principal’s leadership when entering their new setting. The results revealed that “the rapid turnover of school leaders and
principals especially creates significant barriers to educational change” (p. 86).

Establishing relationships and connecting with a school community to understand the organizational embedded traditions and structures, along with the key actions taken by the previous successor, takes time. Although principal reassignments may be perceived as a measure to change the status quo, to lead a reform measure, and create discontinuity in order to move the school in a new and different direction from his or her predecessor, principal reassignments lacking a succession plan may negatively impact the transition experience and overall effectiveness of the school.

To further support the need to keep effective principals in current assignments in order to establish relationships, work together with school team members to allow the new leader time to understand current practices, and identify next steps in the school reform process, Marks and Nance (2007) investigated the affect and ability of the principal to influence improved instructional programs related to teachers’ active participation in the decision-making process. They examined data from the Public School Principal File of the School and Staffing Survey and found that “to improve teaching and learning, schools depend on the concerted efforts of administrators and teachers” (p. 28). Inspiring leaders often lift their schools, only to see the gains disappear when mediocre successors follow them. Effective leaders may perform miracles in turning a failing school around; maintaining the effectiveness after the leaders have gone was yet another challenge to consider with principal reassignments.

When considering a principal reassignment, how the change will impact the school team and the current status of the achievement rate needs to be taken into account. Meyer and colleagues (2009) studied the impact in 12 urban to rural secondary schools to
determine how teachers reacted and made sense of administrators’ actions during leadership change. Participants in Nova Scotia were selected from middle schools who had experienced more than one principal succession. Approximately 100 teachers and principals were interviewed. The findings suggested that “teacher morale was a critical factor that influences the ability of the new principal to carry out their responsibilities and to initiate change” (Meyer et al., 2009, p. 184). As repeated changes in leadership occur, teachers understandably detach from school reform initiatives believing that it will be only a matter of time before a new principal was assigned. Assuming such a position during the principal succession event significantly affects trust among a school team, therefore hindering the forward progress of school improvement measures.

Teacher-principal working relationships naturally experience an adjustment phase during the principal succession transition, and trust in the system may change during rapid turnover of school leaders. Macmillan, Meyer, and Northfield (2004) examined principal succession and the impact on teachers through interviews using a constructivist inquiry in a mixed-methods study of 95 secondary and middle school teachers and principals in Nova Scotia. The findings proposed that “teachers appear to analyze everything that a new principal does as a means to gain sense of the degree to which a principal can be trusted” (p. 291). Principal entry in the absence of a succession plan proves to be challenging, as actions are scrutinized to determine to what degree teachers, staff, students, and community members can trust the newly appointed principal.

This chapter will examine the impact of principal succession, planned or unplanned. A change in leadership is a notable event in the life of a school, and sustainability of improvement efforts over time that is often influenced by predecessor
and successor leadership actions. Maintaining school effectiveness hinges on understanding the impact principal succession bears on the organizational system over time. The focus of future leadership appointments must be characterized less by how to reassign principals between schools and more about by how to retain effective principals when schools are doing well. This requires purposeful succession planning inclusive of structures focused on the likelihood of success during the pre-arrival, arrival and post-arrival stages of principal succession that is based on carefully planned continuity.

Succession planning also considers building leadership capacity opportunities among members of the school team that follows a distributive leadership model with the intent of cultivating future leaders in the organization from which successors may be selected. When a new principal is assigned, a system of support embedded with an outcome of retainment will keep the focus on the reform efforts to establish permanent practices instead of temporary fixes many schools experience.

**Purposeful Succession Planning**

Although a potentially valuable source of energy and renewal, the process of changing the school principal may be risky and troublesome. Frequent changes of leaders may prove to be disruptive and may negatively impact a school’s efficacy. Purposeful succession planning that is carefully arranged and is an integral part of the school’s improvement plan allows districts and schools to proactively support leadership and continuity to increase the effectiveness of a school. Succession planning is a key strategic plan for the future sustainability of a school. Assigning the right principal with the necessary skill sets in the appropriate school at the right time is at the core of effective succession planning.
School efficacy depends on the quality of school leadership. When succession plans involve a system of support for a smooth transition as the new leader was placed to lead the school in a new and different direction from his or her predecessor, school teams can focus on carrying out the goals of the leader. Peters (2011) utilized a case study format for a qualitative study to understand leadership succession planning of high school principals in urban settings. The findings depicted that “leadership succession was ensconced within a larger plan that strategically and consistently considers the needs of the organization in terms of leadership and its impact on the organization” (p. 81). To meet the needs of the community at large, schools and districts must plan for leadership change in a proactive manner that is focused on the improvement process and is inclusive of all members.

When the impact of a principal succession was examined by district leaders, Meyer and colleagues (2009) affirmed that “whatever happens prior to, during, or after a succession event, teacher morale was affected by a principal succession event” (p. 172). Further review of principal succession planning and the impact on school effectiveness was a necessary step in identifying a system of support in the placements of new principals. By doing so, educational leaders can consider the requisites needed during the first year transition from one principal to another in order to ensure that the placement of the new leader was the right fit for the school organization.

As the role of the principal was evaluated in an era of accountability, Marks and Nance (2007) conducted a quantitative study and examined responses from principals of 8,524 questionnaires representing the 50 states from the Public School Principal File to analyze the link between the influence of the school principal and the improvement of
curricular and instructional programs. The findings showed that “to improve teaching and learning, schools depend on the concerted efforts of administrators and teachers” (p. 28). The leadership of the principal was a critical factor affecting the implementation of change initiatives in the reform process. Utilizing a shared leadership model that invites teachers to join the principal in the curricular reorganization plan allows the focus to remain on the continuous improvement process and attainment of performance goals. The relationship and connectedness between the principal and school community was a vital ingredient correlated to an efficacious partnership associated with the challenges imposed by accountability and the demands of reforming a failing school.

A deep understanding of a school’s history and fixed traditions was necessary, and these understandings are most often found within the hearts and minds of the school community. Miskel and Owens (1983) surveyed teachers and principals in urban, suburban, and rural schools in a mid-western state and examined the after-effects of principal succession on two sets of important organization variables in schools: coupling and effectiveness. They concluded that principal effectiveness was more visible during the pre- and post-arrival phase, noted as the unstable period. As established structures are renegotiated, changes in school policies provide the opportunity to obtain input from all stakeholders, thus promoting an inclusive and transparent process for restructuring necessary in the school improvement cycle. Most organizations provide little coaching or support to help principals work through the emotional aspects of leadership succession.

Leadership transition is a complex process as described by Fink and Brayman (2006) who conducted interviews of principals and teachers by asking open-ended questions connected to the leadership transition in the project schools. The findings
revealed, “If principals are viewed by teachers, parents, and students as merely interchangeable messengers of agents external to the school, then the kind of leadership required for long-term, sustained enhancement of learning for all students will remain cruelly elusive” (p. 86). District leaders must provide schools with sufficient time to achieve desired outcomes and establish a transparent process for the selection of the new principal. In doing so, school communities will have a better understanding of the reason for the principal succession resulting in a higher likelihood of supporting the new leader and improvement actions associated with a school improvement plan. Leadership succession is one of the most important but overlooked factors that impact sustainable school improvement. Successful succession is about growing and connecting leadership throughout a system, not just finding the right fit for individual needs.

In the age of school accountability, mounting pressures to improve schools with lackluster performance creates a sense of urgency that may influence the principal selection process. Jones and Webber (2001) conducted a case study and interviewed study participants of principals, students, support staff, parents, and faculty from the case school on the succession experience. Findings suggested that a change in perspective of principal succession must shift from a principal-centered event to a structure that involves all stakeholders. The researchers affirmed that school districts must focus on leadership development in their succession planning to “find ways to invite school communities into the work of planning for their schools” (p. 12). Including the voices of community stakeholders connects to the expertise within the community, assists with the transition process, and supports the principal in interpreting the culture of the school organization. To further support this claim, Fauske and Ogawa (1987) conducted interviews and
observations in an elementary school setting and identified three criteria for site selection: small elementary school, principal change was unforced, and entry to the site before the announcement of the pending principal change. They found that “organizational members who are not directly involved in replacing administrators may attach very different meanings to succession than those who are involved” (p. 42). Ensuring the design of a clearly defined process enables the focus to remain on the work instead of misguided distractors that hinder forward progress.

District superintendents often believe that improvement goals in the reform plans can be achieved by reassigning outstanding principals from high achieving schools and replacing them with less experienced or effective leaders who will maintain the gains that have been attained. These rotational practices have the potential to establish a perpetual cycle in which previous gains attained by a school diminish under the leadership of the newly appointed principal. A focus on adopting a sound system for principal reassignments was needed for the greater good of the organization.

**Impact of Principal Reassignments**

To respond to the demands of school accountability measures, district superintendents and governing boards often view principal reassignments as a means to improve overall school performance. A principal succession plan will ensure that the right candidate was recommended for the vacancy to lead the school in a new and improved direction. Barker (2006), in her qualitative historical study based on interviews of three successive heads and how each contributed to the transformation of a school, found that “leadership succession at all levels was . . . an underestimated dimension in school improvement that provides an important opportunity to refresh an established
culture and mission” (p. 290). And yet, the long-term effects of principal reassignments are often unclear when considering the match and experiences candidates possess. Barker also referenced that “although a potentially valuable source of energy and renewal, the process of changing the head was hazardous and can be disruptive” (p. 290).

Lasting changes in the reform process require sustained leadership over time and was viewed as an essential component of the reorganization process. Allowing sufficient time for the restructuring of a school program requires that the school leader invest in growing relationships, building leadership capacity among team members, and embedding structures to support the work in the reform process. Schmitt and Schechtman (1990) reviewed the empirical research to identify pertinent literature assessing the selection procedure used, if any, to identify talented school administrators. An analysis of computerized literature search of the Social Science Citation Index and the Educational Resources Information Center was conducted, and it was determined that of the resources that matched the query of the process by which principals are chosen, the research lacked a systematic framework detailing the steps in the selection process. The study found that “in most districts across the country, principal selection was still a process that was shaped by cultural, political, and economic forces” (p. 237).

In the absences of a principal succession plan, reassignments are usually a reactive event rather than a proactive process. During the pre- and postsuccession experience, Ogawa (1991) conducted a study examining how teachers made sense of the succession of their principal. The research found that staff naturally progressed through stages of sense making as a way to interpret the effects of the new principal reassignment and the impact on the organization. The purpose of the study was to describe how members of a
faculty of a public elementary school made sense of a nonforced succession of its principal during the postsuccession period. The qualitative analysis of the data was conducted by examining school documents, observations of staff through social interactions between the principal and staff in informal and formal settings, and interviews of teachers and principal. The study was designed to facilitate the identification and analysis of emergent themes from the data collected. As the school staff responded to the successor’s perceived shortcomings and behaviors, or observed the successor as one who adhered to existing organizational norms, the changes in school culture and program effectiveness was impacted. Table 1 describes the stages and characteristics for each stage.

Frequent principal reassignments may lead to a perpetual cycle of inconsistent gains in student achievement and alter the working culture of the organization. The change process takes time, a frequently missing ingredient as impatience to accelerate the desired outcomes prevails, especially within failing schools. Hargreaves (2005) examined more than 250 interviews of teachers and administrators who worked in eight high schools in the United States from 1970 to 1990. He noted, “Principals who are making strides in school improvement need to remain in their schools for more than five years if their changes are going to stick” (p. 171).

In order to implement key actions in the improvement process and increase a school’s effectiveness, input from the school community was vital in identifying characteristics and traits the new candidate must possess in order to establish a unanimous endorsement. Perceptions about a newly appointed principal will naturally surface and must be addressed in order to move past concerns school organization
### Table 1

**Teacher Sense-Making Over Time on Postsuccession Stages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stage 1: Enchantment | • New principal was committed to their school  
                         • Approached the succession with optimism  
                         • Hoped successor would leave them to decide instructional matters in the privacy of their classrooms  
                         • Personable, support teachers, provided a sense of unity in the school |
| Stage 2: Disenchantment | • Culminating in teacher’s questioning of the principal’s commitment to teachers and school  
                         • Change in perceptions based on interactions with principal  
                         • Anger and insecurity |
| Stage 3: Accommodation | • Changes instituted by principal did not significantly affect teachers  
                         • Principal biding time  
                         • Teachers isolated themselves in the classroom  
                         • Teachers continued to focus on positive traits of principal |


members may have and focus on the work of improving the school’s effectiveness.

LeGore and Parker (1997) conducted a qualitative single case study and examined principal succession between two “insider” principals in a rural and suburban school district to analyze the opinions from members during the reorganization process.

Succession was examined through interpretive perspectives of stages of succession; pre-arrival, arrival, post-arrival of the successor. Data were collected through formal and informal interviews of 11 teachers and a principal from an elementary school. The information gathered revealed the thoughts, feelings, and opinions relative to the
succession of the school’s principal. Observations and school documents about the school were reviewed and examined. The findings from the study suggested that “it cannot be taken for granted that an inside successor will want or need the assistance of the predecessor in determining what procedures to follow and what direction to take” (p. 382). Implications from this study specified that future research needs to examine the transfer of control from one principal to another, especially if the candidate was perceived as an insider and the assumption was made that the newly appointed leader will uphold the status quo. The working relationship established between the successor and the school community was influenced by leadership style and faculty expectations. Administrative appointments work best when approached with an intentional plan that was deliberate and systematic to ensure leadership continuity in the midst of organizational change.

To add an outsider’s perspective on the impact of principal reassignments, Hart (1988) examined her personal succession in a qualitative case study as a junior high school principal, where principals had been hand-picked for decades. Her research offered a successor’s personal view through a diary participant observation. Field notes were recorded through audio tape combined with observation notes, informal interviews, and personal reflections on the experience. The findings that whether the principal was perceived as an insider or outsider, “action can be taken, both by principals and by those who appoint them, to improve the success rate and contributions to education of more divergent cadre of school leaders” (p. 350). Candidates for principal assignments benefit from a structure of support that was responsive to the needs of the school organization to support a smooth transition in leadership succession.
Increasing the Likelihood of Successor Success

Principal succession plans inclusive of a system for recruitment, development, and retention will increase the likelihood of successor success. Perceptions about a successor’s experience influence the transition event during a leadership change. Meyer and colleagues (2009) found “teacher morale was a critical factor that influences the ability of the new principal to carry out their responsibilities and to initiate change” (p. 184). New principals may devote much of their time in the management aspect of the position, rather than establishing relationships with school staff in order to improve the overall achievement. Understanding the reason for the change in leadership may help to minimize misconceptions, and these crucial conversations assist in dispelling the rumors that may arise when a new principal is assigned. Zimmerman (2007) used a qualitative case-study method to describe participants’ own words and behaviors to describe their experience during a principal succession event. Four factors influencing the experience were learning about the position and school, establishing relationships, initiating change, and gaining support. Four school leaders who were beginning new positions in four educational settings in a mid-western state were interviewed to collect data through 60-minute, semi-structured tape-recorded interviews. All participants acknowledged that “they were likely to use small steps to initiate changes during the transitional phase” (p. 40). An inclusive process that involves organizational members provides assurance that change will occur in a thoughtful manner that was considerate of past and current norms of practice.

One issue influencing the acceptance of the successor was whether the candidate was homegrown from within the district or an outsider, perceived as lacking knowledge
of key district initiatives. Organizational members tend to assume “insiders” will support established norms, rather than change them. This phenomenon was confirmed through the research conducted by Ganz and Hoy (1977), who surveyed elementary principals in New Jersey, administered battery scales designed to measure behavior and teacher’s reaction to the principals, and found that “whether the administrator was the superintendent, the secondary principal, or the elementary principals, change was more likely to occur from administrators who were outsiders rather than insiders” (p. 189). As new leadership transforms the identity of the school organization during the reform sequence, organizational members are more apt to accept the change if they perceive that the historical aspect of the school’s existence will be acknowledged and honored throughout the process.

Devoting the time to establish relationships with the school community was another factor in determining the trajectory of the successor’s tenure at the school. Meyer and colleagues (2009) learned that “teachers who do not feel valued or part of the decision-making process become less committed to work outside their classrooms and tend to focus on the immediate instead of the long-term needs of the school” (p. 184). Teacher confidence influences the ability of a new principal to carry out their responsibilities in initiating necessary changes. Strengthening staff relationships was an on-going process built on honesty and trust, developed over time.

Successful transition from one leader to another was a critical component during the principal succession event. Cocklin and Wilkinson (2011) studied the leadership reality during the transition between the new and incumbent principal at a suburban elementary school. Data were gathered through interviews of the principal, five staff
members, and six parents. The average interview length was 1 hour, and the focus of the questions was the issues and experiences of the leadership and change during the transition event. The researchers concluded, “Succession was not a singular event, but one spread over time with distinct phases and demands” (p. 665). To fully understand and appreciate the teaching and learning experiences of the school community, a great deal of time was needed to comprehend the school organization by conducting a needs assessment to identify the actions necessary for the improvement process.

Planned succession is an inclusive event that supports sustaining improvements over the long term rather than unsustainable temporary fixes. Principal tenure is a critical factor in achieving planned improvement goals over time. Ryan and Gallo (2011) examined the practice of rotating administrators every 3 to 5 years and assigning new principals to new schools without adequate preparation and knowledge of the school culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted of representatives from 20 school boards, administrators, teachers, staff, and reviewed surveys results and observations documents. The study found that “rotation of school administrators every 3 to 5 years was not seen as a positive practice, because it promoted a managerial response to school leadership rather than a vision, which requires sustained leadership over time” (p. 144). If continuous school improvement is the goal, the need for systematic and purposeful planning is an important tool to improve leadership effectiveness by allowing sufficient time for the changes to endure.

Adapting to the school environment requires the new leader to devote time and energy in understanding the traditions and practices of the school. Bengtson and colleagues (2013) conducted a qualitative case study and examined the practices of four
United States school systems regarding the socialization of 29 principals that faced challenges in turnaround schools upon assuming their position in a large urban district and three smaller rural systems. Interviews were semi-structured, framed by a 15-question protocol, and themes were identified and categorized. Implications from the study stated “the degree to which a succeeding principal becomes acclimated to their new role and the nature of their socialization experiences are largely dictated by the organization” (p. 158). Furthermore, the study found that “as research continues to emerge on the principal’s influence on students learning . . . it is time that systems expand the field of attention that focuses on teacher and student to include school leaders” (p. 160).

Effective principal succession planning considers the socialization aspect principals face when assuming their new role. Supporting the newly appointed or reassigned principal during the onset of the change in administration may promote higher levels of leadership competency throughout the principal’s tenure and have a positive impact on the school’s effectiveness.

**Leadership Continuity and Principal Succession**

Often, a matter of chance rather than planning drives the decision for principal reassignments. For struggling schools, the selection and retention of principals is a critical element in school transformation. Less than ideal school compositions and possible principal burnout affect the tenure of principals. Ogawa and Hart (1985) conducted a quantitative study and examined the California Assessment Results of third-, sixth-, and twelfth-grade students in 124 elementary schools and 151 high schools to determine if good leaders produce good results. The findings suggested that “if research
determines that superintendents do influence the instructional performance of districts, then an investigation of the extent to which that influence was direct and how much is routed through principals may prove illuminating” (p. 71). Next to the teacher as a major predictor of student success is the quality of the school principal. Assumed productivity of school leaders placed with the intent to take them from low performing school to high performing levels is vital and often lacking in principal succession.

Considering the explicit focus on leadership transition and the associated issues of principalship continuity and change, Cocklin and Wilkinson (2011) examined how a new principal with a commitment to improving quality teaching and leadership followed on from a long-standing principal with a more hierarchical and traditional approach to leadership. The method used was an exploratory case study by designing an open interview the current principal, five staff members, and six parents exploring the issues associated with the principal change. The research found that “the principal succession was successful in that important issues of tradition were continued, while important changes were also implemented” (p. 672). Leadership transition is a complex process, multifaceted and context specific. When taking a failing school through the transformation process to make it better, principal selection is a critical component and predictor of success. Taking into account the traditions of the school was needed to ensure a positive experience as the school’s effectiveness was improved.

When investigating principal turnover rates, the composition of the school and community is often perceived as a deciding factor determining whether to settle in the newly appointed position. To further investigate the longevity of a principal’s tenure, an investigation of turnover rates was examined to determine if particular types of schools
with associated traits influenced principal mobility and attrition. Gates and colleagues (2006) conducted a quantitative study using competing risks framework to follow principal transitions. Data set analyzed was the Illinois State Board of Education and the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction. The information was merged with information from the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core data. A variety of factors for appointed principals was included in the examination of turnover rates. The descriptive analysis in this particular study revealed stability among school principals, specifically for large school appointments. Gates and colleagues found that “principals in a large school are less likely to assume a principalship in another school or leave the principalship to assume another position in the school system” (p. 300). In some instances, principal turnover may not be a bad occurrence. It may be that the appointment was not the right fit for the school. Recognizing these possible outcomes further supports the need to establish a system of checks and balances to ensure that newly appointed principals are provided with support to transition efficaciously in their assignment.

While investigating the impact principal succession had on schools in the midst of the accelerated schools reform process, Davidson and Taylor (1999) conducted a qualitative study design using the case study methodology to examine the impact of principal succession on the reform effort in two mid-western schools. Data were collected utilizing semi-structured interviews of teacher leaders and administrators using purposeful sampling to identify participants. Responses were transcribed and examined for trends about the perceptions during the principal succession event connected to the reform effort. The results of the study found that “when a principal leaves a school after
initiating a restructuring effort, the changes fade quickly unless the successor principal supports the changes” (p. 6). The authors further described, “When a principal uses a restructuring effort to build teachers’ leadership and when teachers are included in the selection of a successor principal, the changes are likely to be sustained” (p. 6). Leaving principal reassignments to a matter of chance, rather than planning, puts less effective schools at risk for further detriment. For struggling schools, the selection and retention of principals was a critical element in school transformation in need of further investigation. If most appointments occur in less than ideal school compositions, thus leading to possible principal burnout that affects the tenure of principals, it would behoove superintendents to establish a system needed to provide the proper support focused on positive outcomes for the organization as a whole.

**Tapping Into the Principal Pipeline**

In a time of high principal turnover and burnout, shortages of highly qualified candidates is a challenge necessitating that school districts look within the organization to tap into the principal pipeline. Current principals must recognize the leadership potential in teachers in order to place them on the pathway to the principalship. Myung and colleagues (2011) conducted a quantitative study and analyzed data from the Miami-Dade County Public Schools from the 2007-2008 school year. The data included surveys of teachers, principals, and assistant principals from the largest school district in Florida. A total of 15,840 surveys were examined and focused on teacher’s interest in pursuing the principalship through the use of “tapping” as an informal recruitment strategy in the absence of a formal succession plan. The findings suggest that teachers are motivated to consider becoming a principal when tapped by their current site administrator. The
researchers concluded, “Tapping does appear to have a significant impact on teachers’ interest in school leadership as well as the probability of actually becoming principals” (p. 722).

Adopting a tapping system to build leadership capacity within the organization may prove advantageous. Providing teachers with leadership skills the opportunity to take on tasks that will grow experiences connected to the work of a principal, and linked to the organization’s vision and mission, proves to be advantageous in growing the pool of qualified candidates. Myung and colleagues (2011) reported that “districts might benefit from encouraging that tapping be based more on teachers’ leadership competencies than personal traits such as race or gender” (pp. 722-723). School principals oftentimes look to the school team members as a possible pool of candidates to delegate tasks in order to build leadership capacity and experience for the principalship. Schmitt and Schechtman (1990) concluded, “The key was identifying the needed knowledge, skills, and abilities; then, determining how those elements will be tapped by the selection procedures, and how to administer that procedure fairly and objectively” (p. 238). Establishing a system that identifies candidates who are talented and can work in the leadership realm successfully will grow the pool from which to recruit.

Identifying, keeping, and supporting high quality leaders will ensure that school improvement initiatives will focus on improving student outcomes and high impact teaching and learning practices. To achieve this, current recruitment and retention practices must be evaluated related to succession planning, recruitment and selection, leadership development, and induction programs designed to support aspiring leaders. It is an advantageous move for districts to prepare for leadership succession by forecasting
and placing skilled leaders in vacant positions. By anticipating principal vacancies, this will increase the intent for continuous leadership development and increase the pool of highly qualified candidates prepared to meet the challenges of the principal role. As appointments are made, succession planning efforts require that newly appointed principals be given the time and support to implement structures that focused on the ever-present school improvement process.

Rhodes and Brundrett (2005) conducted semi-structured interviews of 12 administrators from middle school in a study to explore the leadership talent identification, development, succession and retention in schools, and perceptions of leadership succession. The findings concluded that “a change in role to that of leader was likely to impinge upon the professional identity of teacher and perhaps precipitate a crisis of identity for some people” (p. 17). These findings are indicative of a need to establish structure to build leadership capacity among teachers with innate qualities necessary for the transition to a leadership position. Further research on the topic will continue.

Change in leadership is associated with change in the organizational structure as a reform measure to improve student achievement. In the absence of a principal succession plan, the changes may adversely impact the school improvement process and the organizational culture. Allowing and encouraging principals who are achieving success with school reform measures to stay longer in their schools so that the improvements become entrenched in the school culture is a critical consideration when reassignments occur. When considering leadership development, there is a need to establish improved career pathways for teachers displaying leadership qualities associated with school leaders. Future administrators may benefit from a system of continuous leadership
development through their involvement and support by mentors serving in management positions. Leadership supply remains a vital element in the life of any school; taking steps to increase the candidate pool is an approach to grow potential within the organization. Brundrett, Rhodes, and Gkolia (2006) examined the impact of appointments within the organization and found “the appointment of individuals to leadership positions within school has potentially profound implications, not only on those individuals, but also for their colleagues and the school in which they work” (p. 260). A transition from a teaching position to a management position may alter the established relationship grounded on the perceptions held by colleagues.

Mentoring and coaching to support development of leadership skills for administrators improves relationships with colleagues, increases job satisfaction, and surges greater organizational effectiveness. Mentoring school leaders is a more complex task than it may seem and, without the appropriate support, newly appointed principals can experience stress and burnout, and leave the profession all together. Simkins, Close, and Smith (2009) examined the impact of work shadowing and determined that this structure was an underresearched aspect of leadership development. In their study, it was found that by providing participants with the opportunity to experience the realities of the position, challenges and pressures connected to the leadership position proved beneficial for future undertakings. Effective performance in the role of leadership and how these can be developed better prepares candidates for the real demands of the job, provides opportunities for candidates to fulfill the demands of the role, and provides participants with natural experience appropriate to meet the varied needs associated with the
principalship. Simkins and colleagues defined work shadowing models, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Shadowing Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of shadowing</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pure Shadowing</td>
<td>Observing the Head at work was the primary activity, and discussion with the Head were framed by the issues that arose from the activities observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shadowing Plus In-depth Discussion</td>
<td>Shadowing combined with lengthy discussion occurred about broader and deeper issues of headship that did not necessarily drive from the particular activities observed on the shadowing days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Understating the School</td>
<td>Process was orchestrated so the participant got a broader picture of the school, of challenges faced by the leadership, and of various perspectives on the school that could not be obtained by spending most of their time with the Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Investigating a Personal Issue</td>
<td>Placements were organized to enable the participants to develop their understanding of specific issues they particularly wished to explore, such as examining documents, observation, and speaking to staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Work shadowing as a means to provide talented candidates with an opportunity to live the principalship experience was one useful method to include in a principal succession plan. Simkins and colleagues (2009) concluded, “Effective work-shadowing can address concerns about transition, capability and identity. . . an important outcome of
the process can be the opportunity it provides shadowers to think themselves into the headship role” (p. 248).

**Criteria for Principal Selection**

The selection of a principal requires consideration of characteristics needed to respond to the multitude of pressures the position inherently encompasses. The superintendent is responsible for the selection of school principals within the context identified by an organization’s school board. If the goal of hiring excellent administrators is to promote a school system’s competitive edge, how then do superintendents respond to the challenges of filling their building level administrative openings? Do they define selection criteria before they conduct searches? Do they initiate broad searches, interview numerous candidates, and analyze how well each candidate meets selection criteria and the needs of particular position before selecting the preferred candidate?

Finding the right person to fill the multilayered role of a school administrator is a major responsibility of the superintendent, and considering whether candidates are willing to do the work of school administration is evident during the selection phase. Hooker (2000) conducted an investigation through open-ended interviews of seven nonrandom superintendents from rural/suburban, suburban, mid-sized city school districts in one state. Each interview of 21 open-ended, semi-structured questions were asked and varied in length from 1.5 to 3 hours. The findings from Hooker’s study depicted the views and perceptions that each superintendent had about the district in which they were currently employed. An in-depth analysis of the participant’s responses generated decision points and strategies in the recruitment and selection of principals, adapted from the study and listed in Table 3.
Table 3

*Decision Points*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision points</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Encouraging and Mentoring Insiders</td>
<td>Occurred well before a position vacancy became available, level of energy varies by each superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gathering and Analyzing Information</td>
<td>Ongoing process for superintendents, impressions, opinions, and preferences in connection with the position already in superintendent’s mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Vacancy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Decision Sharing</td>
<td>Dominant coalition in the search effort comprised of insiders and parent associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Recruitment</td>
<td>Internal review process, scouting style, statewide call out strategy, local call out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Screening and Interviewing</td>
<td>Determined by the search committee, members determine the selection criteria, explicitly or implicitly, applicants invited to a face-to-face interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


During the identification of candidates for an administrative vacancy, a series of actions by the superintendent were taken as a way to ensure that an intentional effort to fill administrative vacancies was in place. Applicant characteristics were considered, however, not clearly identified as the author of the study found. Approaching the task through a shared decision-making model is a way to enhance community acceptance throughout the process. During the screening stages, a multitude of factors were considered in the search for the right candidate. Seven major themes were found in the screening and selection criteria articulated by superintendents in the study:
• Previous administrative experience

• Personal characteristics expected of a building level administrator, e.g. intelligence, perceptiveness, and flexibility

• Organizational skills

• Human relations skills and the ability to establish rapport with students and teachers

• Educational expertise

• Ability to fit in and work with an existing administrative team at the building level, the central office level, or both

• Ability to gain support from parents and community. (Hooker, 2000, p. 196)

These themes indicated that the depth of consideration stretched out beyond the credentials held. Superintendents considered the multi-dimensional qualities necessary to meet the complexity of the work. It is also evident that more research is needed to gather input from a larger pool of superintendents. Although research described methods utilized during the search of a new principal, very little is known about the systems used to select individuals who are appointed to administrative positions.

The selection and appointment of a new administrator undergoes a variety of procedures connected to the organization’s policies and regulations. The recommendations made by a superintendent undergo further inquiry by the governing board to obtain final approval. In the research conducted by the American Association of School Administrators Committee (AASA, 1967) to identify how the right principal candidate was selected for the right school, described that “the primary purpose of selection devices or instruments was to yield information on predictor variables pertinent
to a decision as to who shall be chose principal” (p. 34). The study goes on to describe that “the school board elects principals to the office on the basis of recommendations from the chief school executive” (p. 10). Considering whether candidates are the right fit for the vacancy, AASA also noted that “a principal can make a difference where it counts, for he practices his art at an important focal point, namely, the school building” (p. 9). This requires in-depth understanding of the characteristics associated with the school and school community. The following recommendations made by the AASA used during the selection process were compiled and used as an index to measure a candidate’s worthiness of further consideration for the position and to determine if they were likely to succeed (see Table 4).

The selection of people for administrative positions is a difficult decision a district superintendent faces. Schmitt and Schechtman (1990) stated that “unless the local community values student achievement and perceives the principal as influencing that achievement, the merits of a particular candidate become a minimally significant factor in the decision process” (p. 233). Forming a selection committee and identifying the desired characteristics that will guide the discussion about the candidate’s worth is inherent during the process. In spite of the selection criteria, there is still a lack of uniformity among superintendents regarding the recruitment and selection of school principals (Baron, 1990; Hooker, 2000; Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990).

As vacancies become available, and the pressure to fill these positions grows, district superintendents are faced with the reality that the candidacy pool is limited, resulting in recommending an individual with limited skills. This raises the question, what induction plan is available to mentor new principals and how will the district
Table 4  

Factors Used in Principal Selection and Some Related Measuring Devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors used in selection</th>
<th>Devices used in measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age, experience, family history</td>
<td>Biographical information blank, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Breadth of general knowledge</td>
<td>Achievement tests, transcripts, ratings, by competent observers, interview letters of recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Breadth of specialized knowledge of education</td>
<td>Achievement tests, transcripts, ratings by competent observers, interview, letters of recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Command of the English language and ability to articulate thoughts</td>
<td>Tests, interviews, ratings by competent observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Dependability, drive</td>
<td>Ratings by competent observers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Emotional stability and other characteristic of personality</td>
<td>Test, rating by competent observers, letters of recommendation, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Human relation skills</td>
<td>Ratings by or conversation with competent observers, letters of recommendation, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Interest</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Likely administrative behavior or creativity</td>
<td>Situational performance tests, interview, letters of recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Mental ability or intelligence</td>
<td>Intelligence test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Moral fitness</td>
<td>Ratings by or conversation with competent observers, letters of recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Scholarship</td>
<td>Transcript, letters of recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Value patterns</td>
<td>Test of values, ratings by or conversation with competent observers, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Physical fitness or health</td>
<td>Health examination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from *The Right Principal for the Right School*, by American Association of School Administrators (AASA), 1967, Washington, DC: Author, p. 44
dispense support over time? Mentoring and coaching to support development strategies for administrators improve relationships with colleagues, increased job satisfaction, and greater organizational commitment for continued professional growth. Mentoring school leaders is a more complex task than it may seem. Without appropriate support, principals can experience stress and burnout and leave the profession. Good mentoring with someone who offers suggestions provides adequate feedback, challenges the process, and pushes candidates forward to prepare them for the demands and realities of the job. A principal succession plan that includes a component to further develop leadership skills is needed to move the organization forward.

Due to the limited research available on the selection criteria and decision-making process, the practice of hiring new principals or principal reassignments is still a decision deeply rooted in the philosophy of the district’s superintendent and one of the most important decisions he or she faces. Schmitt and Schechtman’s (1990) review of empirical studies found that “selecting a new principal represents one of the most visible acts for a superintendent; consequently he/she was constrained by cultural, political, and economic forces when making a selection decision” (p. 233). They went on to state the difficulty in finding papers that involved an empirical study of the validity of principal selection procedures which further reinforces the need to establish a systematic succession plan that identifies how to plan for, develop, and retain future school leaders.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this case study research was to gain further understanding of principal succession, planned or unplanned, and the effects appointments or reassignments had on a school. Considering the impact principal assignments have on the effectiveness of a school, the researcher examined and defined the systems used for the selection of school leaders, leadership development, and measures to ensure successor success. Research continues to confirm that the principal plays a critical role in determining the effectiveness of a school (Hargreaves, 2005; Peters, 2011; Ryan & Gallo, 2011; Zimmerman, 2007). A close examination as to how principal succession planning is approached by top level administrators was a central focus for the study and included the further analysis of the decision-making process used when selecting a principal for an assignment. A change in leadership is a significant event in the life of a school and leadership succession that includes predecessor contact is an underestimated dimension in the principal transition event. If principal succession planning is a key strategic plan for the future effectiveness of a school, what systematic design is used to ensure that the selection of the principal is the right fit, at the right time, for the school? What systems are in place to support the incoming principal during the leadership administration transition?

The need for deliberate and purposeful principal succession planning is an important tool in the school reform process, and very little is known about how and why principals are selected. School efficacy depends on the quality of school leadership, further supporting the belief that the leadership qualities of a principal are a critical factor in increasing a school’s effectiveness. Lack of strategic succession planning may obscure
the principal selection process in the midst of mounting pressures to improve a school’s overall achievement. This study investigated the ways in which principals were selected, where they were placed, and investigated the pre- and posttransition experience in an effort to identify the complexities of the selection and appointment experience during the first year of the newly appointed or reassigned principal. Furthermore, once the change in leadership occurred, this study examined the impact the appointment or reassignment had on the school. In addition, this study investigated the systems of support in place to retain newly appointed principals during their transition year.

**Interview Questions**

The constant change of principals may impact the effectiveness of the school. If a change in leadership was intended for the long term, more attention needs to be paid to leadership succession from the perspective of leadership development, mentoring, and support. As Hargreaves (2005) described “successful succession depends on sound planning, successful employment of outbound and inbound leadership knowledge, limiting the frequency of succession events, and preserving leadership in the face of movements towards management” (p. 164). A strong match between the principal and the school characteristics was a factor to consider when identifying candidates to assign. The successful succession event may be strengthened when the leadership styles were matched to the characteristics of the school needs. The interview questions targeted the recruitment and selection process used by central office administrators when recommending potential candidates for vacancies. The study moved participants from the external realm within their current job capacity to a personal field when describing their own succession experience.
Participants

The researcher interviewed a total of 15 district administrators for this study, employed in urban and suburban districts. The researcher studied both interpretive and inductive data to obtain a set of real-life experiences as a way to better understand the impact of principal succession during the first year of the appointment. Face-to-face interviews with participants was the platform to respond to questions connected to succession planning, challenges, and experiences in the capacity of the principal appointment or reassignment and central office administrators responsible for finding and placing principal candidates in vacancies.

Superintendents

Three male superintendents participated in this study. These superintendents were selected to represent different size districts, and urban and suburban schools. All interviews were conducted face to face in the participant’s natural work environment.

Assistant Superintendents for Human Resources

Three Assistant Superintendents for Human Resources were included in the pool of participants. Two females and one male shared the system in place for the recruitment and selection criteria used when appointing or assigning principals to vacant positions.

Principals

Three principals completing their first year in the appointment or reassignment were identified from the pool of principals in the three districts. Each shared their principal succession experience.
Districts

The districts included in the study represent small, medium, and large student populations with either an urban or suburban status. District A is identified as a K-12 medium-sized unified school district, with a population of 21,000 students; District B is identified as a K-6 large elementary school district, with population of approximately 27,000 students; and District C is a small-sized unified school district with population of 12,000 students.

Background of Participants

District A Cabinet Members

The Superintendent was in his third year of service in the current district. He was appointed from outside of the district where he served as a Superintendent in a neighboring district. He has served 34 years in education. The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources started as a middle school principal in her current district, then promoted to a director position of Human Resource, and then appointed to the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources was in her ninth year of service in her current position. Her appointment was internal, and she arrived to the district as an outsider accepting a principal position in the district 13 years ago (see Table 5).

District A Principals

Principal A was an assistant principal in the current district and left when she accepted a principal position in a neighboring district. She returned when she was appointed to a principal position in her current role. Principal B served as a middle school principal in the same district prior to being appointed principal of an elementary
Table 5

*Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent Backgrounds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
<th>District C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td><em>Outsider appointment</em></td>
<td><em>Outsider appointment</em></td>
<td><em>Insider appointment</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Previous experience in current role</em></td>
<td><em>Assistant Superintendent experience in nearby district</em></td>
<td><em>Promotion from within</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources</td>
<td><em>Insider appointment</em></td>
<td><em>Insider appointment</em></td>
<td><em>Promotion from within the district</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Promotion from within the district</em></td>
<td><em>Promotion from within the district</em></td>
<td><em>Promotion from within the district</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Director experience</em></td>
<td><em>Executive Director experience</em></td>
<td><em>Director experience</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

school and arrived to that appointment as an outsider. He was in his fourth year of service. Principal C was appointed as an outsider where she served as a principal for a charter school. She was in her second of service in her current district.

**District B Cabinet Members**

The Superintendent was in his fifth year of service. He arrived to the district as a principal 10 years prior where he served a 7-year term and then left the district. He returned in his current position resigning from an Assistant Superintendent position from a neighboring district. The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources has been with the district 15 years. He arrived to the district as a principal from out of state. Prior to his current position, he served as an executive director and principal at several sites within the district (see Table 5).
**District B Principals**

Principal A was a teacher in the district and began her leadership transition 12 years ago through her associate principal appointment. She was appointed to a principal position and served at that site for 5 years and then was reassigned to her current position. Principal B arrived to the district as an outsider, accepting an associate principal position where he served a year and a half. He was promoted to a principal position; this was a mid-year appointment. Principal C was promoted from within the district when appointed to an associate principal position within the district. After 2 years, she was then promoted to her current principal position. Principal D was promoted from within the district when appointed to an associate principal position within the district. After a year, she was then promoted to her current position.

**District C Cabinet Members**

The Superintendent was in his eleventh year of service. Prior to his current position, he served as a school principal and district director. He arrived to the district as an outsider when he accepted a principal position. The Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources began her career as a teacher with the district 32 years ago. She was a product of the administrative intern program and moved up the ranks from principal, director, to her current role (see Table 5).

**District C Principals**

Principal A was appointed to her current position from outside of the district. She resigned from a principal position in a neighboring district. Principal B was appointed to her current position from outside of the district. She resigned from a principal position from a nearby district.
Instruments and Procedures

To investigate systems in place for principal succession, the recruitment and selection process utilized by district central office administrators, the researcher employed the qualitative tradition of a case study. The research design involved a case study methodology (Yin & Davis, 2007). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with central office administrators and school principals who just completed year 1 in their appointment or reassignment. Case study research was useful as described by Creswell (2013) when the researcher attempted to understand real-life cases that are in progress to gather accurate information not lost by time.

The study was bound by the unit of analysis (participants), the context (principal transitional experiences), and the sampling criteria (in-coming and out-going principals). To develop an in-depth understanding of the case, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted of superintendents, in-coming principals, out-going principals if available, and central office administrators from selected districts. In addition to the research, the process of constant comparative as defined by Creswell (2013) “was the process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (p. 86) was utilized. To provide corroborating evidence, the method of triangulation design, as described by Creswell (2013), was employed to “compare different sources and provide corroborating evidence as a way to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251).
Interviews

Each of the participants selected was interviewed individually using a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions focused on understanding the topic (Seidman, 2013) of principal succession planning, recruitment and selection, leadership development, and support during the first year of the appointment or reassignment.

The selection was specifically designed for superintendents, central office administrators, and in-coming and out-going principals, if available. The questions for central office leaders included opportunities to describe the principal succession plan in place for appointments or reassignments. The questions for principals focused on the first year experience and gathered recommendations for central office leaders with the lens of identifying ways to improve the leadership transition experience. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Jacob and Ferguson (2012) described interview methods as a way to get to the story of a lived experience within a context, and obtain the perspective of the participants in the study. Jacob and Ferguson (2012) described the following:

An interview protocol was more than a list of interview questions; it also extends to the procedural level of interviewing and includes a script of what you will say before the interview, script for what you will say at the conclusion of the interview, prompts for the interviewer to collect informed consent, and prompts to remind the interviewer the information that she or he was interested in collecting. Interview protocols become not only a set of questions, but also a procedural guide for directing a new qualitative researcher through the interview process. (p. 2)
Participants in the study provided a description of experiences connected to the current principal succession management systems in place in the district. Semi-structured interviews were the sole data source for this qualitative study and were scheduled in advance at a designated location and time. The researcher asked a set of open-ended questions, with additional clarifying questions emerging from the interview between researcher and interviewee. Semi-structured interviews are a widely used interviewing format for qualitative research and can occur either with an individual or in groups (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). See Appendices A and B for interview protocols.

**Interview questions: Superintendents or central office administrators.**

1. Describe the criteria you use when selecting to appoint or replace school principals?
2. What succession plan was in place to support newly assigned or appointed school principals?
3. How do you develop potential candidates for leadership positions?
4. What was your approach for succession planning?

**Interview questions: Principals.**

1. Describe your personal principal placement or reassignment experience.
2. How have you learned from your succession experience and what recommendations would you provide central office leaders?

**Informed Consent**

Following Creswell’s (2013) guidelines for ethical issues in qualitative research, all participants in the study were informed of the purpose and design of the study when asked for their informed consent to participate, including their right to rescind their
Participants were assured of their confidentiality by the use of fictitious names, and
districts were identified by numbers. An important factor in conducting interviews
was establishing trust. Jacob and Ferguson (2012) affirmed, “Your interviewee
understanding that you will hold their confidence and that they may withdraw from the
study at any time was an important aspect of building their trust in you” (p. 7).
Reassuring participants of confidentiality to establish trust increased the probability that
they shared their experiences for the research study. See Appendix C for the Informed
Consent Page.

**Data Analysis**

The design of the study was grounded on semi-structured interviews of participants. Upon the conclusion of the data collection, interviews of six cabinet members, six newly hired principals, and three reassigned principals were gathered, conclusions were drawn, and the researcher was able to complete the study within these data sets. Semi-structured interviews of up to 1 hour in length were conducted with participants. The participants were interviewed in their natural setting, their district office, or school site, through direct contact by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews provided the researcher freedom to tap into greater depth of lived experiences with the principal succession planning system at the district level and the transition year event for newly appointed or reassigned principals.

All interview data were transcribed, and themes were identified using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which categories were created as each transcript was reviewed. Transcripts were re-read several times to determine if pre- and postemerging categories were missed from earlier interview analysis. Examination of
clusters within and between triangulation amid interview types were merged to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative research study provided an insider’s perspective to understanding principal succession planning at the district level and the newly appointed or reassigned principal experience during their first year. By using a qualitative approach, this research involved the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Participants were recruited through telephone calls or electronic email messages, beginning with district superintendents. Once an agreement was established, names of participants matching the criteria were provided and contacted to schedule an interview appointment.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to provide a rich context that was complex within the realm of principal succession and planning. This research study aimed to add new information to the field of principal reassignments and the impact such changes have on a school. The researcher expected to confirm the need for principal succession planning inclusive of support for new leaders in order to increase the likelihood of success during their transition into their new role. Such management structures could potentially influence how candidates are prepared and supported. Identifying mentoring and coaching structures focused on development of the necessary skills effective principals need is an area to consider. When investigating how purposeful systems of support ensure successor success for newly appointed principals and avoid unnecessary frustration and burnout, Peters (2011) concluded, “Part of a district’s succession planning must be retention planning” (p. 80). Having a succession plan within an organization
assures appropriate leadership support systems are in place to develop, sustain, and support key candidates in anticipation of future openings.
CHAPTER 4—FINDINGS

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected with respect to the principal succession plans in place for the identification, recruitment, appointment, and systems in place to support leadership transitions. The overarching question that guided the study was, “How are principals selected and supported during the succession transition event?” The perspective of three district superintendents, three Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, and nine principals who recently completed their first year in a new assignment or appointment, provided the platform for the research study. Embedded within each research group were unique characteristics that were explored in the attempt to understand the decision-making process in place when filling school principal positions and the support provided by central office administrators, once the change was in progress. This study attempted to uncover the perceptions and lived experiences grounded on common factors that emerged during the principal succession year.

Themes

Interviews were the data collection methods used in the effort to answer the questions posed by this study. Once the data were collected and analyzed, five themes emerged:

1. Reason for the appointment
2. Selection criteria and recruitment
3. Interview process and recommendations
4. Principal pipeline
5. Principal succession experiences.
Research Questions

Changes in leadership occur for a variety of reasons: retirements, promotions, resignations, or resulted in the dismissal of ineffective leaders. District superintendents continuously monitored and responded to the goal of increasing a school’s effectiveness through the appointment of a highly qualified candidate. In the absence of a principal succession plan, these changes may inadvertently hinder the school improvement process and impact the organizational structure in adverse ways. The purpose of this research study was to uncover existing succession plans for principal reassignments or appointments and the support provided during the first year.

The supporting research questions that grounded this study included:

1. If the principal was critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the reassignments was influenced by their predecessor, what succession plan was in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurs with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?

2. Many school organizations lack a systemic method for principal selection that may ultimately lead to a recommendation of an unsuitable candidate, thus negatively impacting a school organization. Why then are school districts lacking a principal succession plan?

3. When examining how an organization actively seeks and recruits competent school leaders skilled in supporting district initiatives embedded in improvement plans, how does succession planning fit into an organizations strategic plan?
4. How do school districts arrange for continuous system of leadership support to build capacity and ensure successor success?

**Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and Principal Perspectives**

The data collected were from three districts in southern California. Once the district superintendent accepted to participate in the study, the researcher worked with cabinet leaders to identify principals who met the criteria, first year in their appointment or reassignment. All participants were interviewed and shared their lived experiences about principal succession planning, recruitment, and experience during the principal’s recent first year in their current assignment.

The study was bound by the unit of analysis (participants), the context (principal transitional experiences), and the sampling criteria (in-coming and out-going principals, if available). To develop an in-depth understanding of the case, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted of superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals who recently completed their first year in the assignment. In addition to the research, the process of constant comparative, as defined by Creswell (2013), “was the process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories” (p. 86). To provide corroborating evidence, the method of triangulation design, as described by Creswell (2013), was employed to “compare different sources and provide corroborating evidence as a way to shed light on a theme or perspective” (p. 251).

The interviews were coded and studied to identify relationships from the experiences shared during the interviews process by cabinet members. The same structure was applied when analyzing the data gathered from principal interviews about their first year appointment or reassignment experience. The intent was to compare the
experiences through the principal perspective and cabinet member perspective in an attempt to identify the relationship that binds the search and outcome of the lived experience from the appointment or reassignment.

The following section provides the cabinet members’ perspective during the search for a new principal. All six participants provided their thoughts and experiences to the following questions:

1. Describe the criteria you use when selecting to appoint or replace school principals?
2. What succession plan was in place to support newly assigned or appointed school principals?
3. How do you develop potential candidates for leadership positions?
4. What was your approach for succession planning?

The superintendents described that the search for a new principal began by considering the reason for the appointment. Each shared that their recommendations would differ if the vacancy resulted in a promotion or resignation due to a mismatch of the predecessor, or the assignment did not work out for the school at large. All cabinet members worked together to ground the search on a systematic selection structure connected to the needs of the school community. Finding the right person, or fit, was at the core of the experience.

**Reason for the Appointment**

As principal positions become available, district superintendents are faced with the challenge of hiring qualified candidates to fill those vacancies. Oftentimes, the final recommendation was made by the superintendent, who then presented it to the governing
board. Relying on a selection process in identifying the candidate who reflects the best fit, at the right time, for the school, was at the core of the decision-making process. How then do superintendents arrange for the selection process to occur, and who was invited to participate? If the principal was critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the reassignment was influenced by their predecessors, what succession plan was in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurred with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?

When superintendents were asked to describe the criteria used when selecting to appoint or replace school principals, each participant shared a process directly connected to the reason for the vacancy. The decision-making process district superintendents used when recommending school principals was contingent on the reason for the vacancy and considered the evolution of the school itself. The superintendents in this study noted that although a thoughtful process was used to find and recommend the right candidate for the vacancy, each appointment differed based on the criteria gathered to identify the fit traits for the successor. Each superintendent shared their desire to employ the most promising candidate; however, each appointment was connected to specific factors of compatibility, which this study attempted to uncover.

The commonalities that emerged from the superintendent interviews and Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources described structures currently in place to identify and recruit candidates when looking to replace or appoint principals to vacant positions. All members of the cabinet described a process for tapping into the principal pipeline as new members to the leadership team were identified and groomed for a future in principal positions.
In Table 6, the recruitment criteria shared was categorized by each district, and several tendencies became apparent. All cabinet members relied on the specifications listed in the job application, and these were customized to match the specific needs of the school and district. Another finding noted was when cabinet members discussed the specific criteria during the screening process; these discussions were grounded on the collection of feedback obtained through community forums and the historical background of the school team and population. A more general examination of the findings suggested that all potential candidates would go through a three-tiered process during the selection experience. Key members of the district and school organizations would be invited to participate in the search for the new principal.

Selection Criteria and Recruitment

When asked to describe the criteria used when selecting to appoint or assign school principals, the decision depended on the reason for the vacancy. In situations where the vacancy resulted in a promotion or resignation due to retirement, the superintendent’s decision-making process looked at the recruitment process as an opportunity to promote from within. District B Superintendent shared that when preparing to post for the vacant position:

We looked at how we pre-selected candidates, asked how would we conduct reference checks, analyzed scenarios and questions to capture the emotional strength of each candidate during the interview experience, and decided on the elements included in a scorecard that would be used to rate the performance of each candidate.
The search considered the current pool of Assistant Principals assigned in the district and Teacher Leaders possessing administrative credentials and had an interest in applying as vacancies occurred. Each superintendent shared the ideal baseline qualifications when searching to add or promote members to the school principal ranks.

The selection criteria (Table 7) for potential candidates was generally based in six common areas for all the districts. During the application screening process, candidates who exemplified capabilities in the areas perceived as inherently required were invited to partake in the interview process; instructional leader, managerial skills, child advocate,
Table 7

Candidate Selection Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
<th>District C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Leader</td>
<td>• Common Core Standards</td>
<td>• Common Core Standards</td>
<td>• Common Core Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technology</td>
<td>• Technology</td>
<td>• Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• English Learners</td>
<td>• English Learners</td>
<td>• English Learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Data and Assessment</td>
<td>• Data and Assessment</td>
<td>• Data and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant Manager</td>
<td>• Knows who to call to address pressing issue</td>
<td>• Willing to pick up the phone and find help and support</td>
<td>• Willing to pick up the phone and find help and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Restorative Justice</td>
<td>• Upholds the district’s vision and mission</td>
<td>• Restorative Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive Behavior Intervention Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Resiliency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>• Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>• Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>• Emotional Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Working relationship with Unions</td>
<td>• Working relationship with Unions</td>
<td>• Working relationship with Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Create trust</td>
<td>• Create trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Work within an atmosphere of consensus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Savvy</td>
<td>• Adaptable to school culture</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>• Adaptable to school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowledgeable in how to move school team during change process</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowledgeable in how to move school team during change process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable With Policies in Education</td>
<td>• Collective Bargaining Agreement</td>
<td>• Collective Bargaining Agreement</td>
<td>• Collective Bargaining Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• LCAP/LCFF</td>
<td>• LCAP/LCFF</td>
<td>• LCAP/LCFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• FRISK</td>
<td>• FRISK</td>
<td>• FRISK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluations</td>
<td>• Performance Evaluations</td>
<td>• Performance Evaluations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interpersonal skills, political saviness, and knowledgeable with educational policies. These traits were evident in the narratives that comprised the application process. Each application was reviewed, and members of human resources determined if the candidate was worthy of progressing in the process.

Depending on the overall performance outcome during the interview, and if the candidate was a good match for the position, the selection process included a component to obtain input from the community members through a forum facilitated by members of cabinet. District C Superintendent stated:

Once I have sifted for the kind of characteristics I’m looking for during the qualifications process, then I’m going to look at what the school staff and community has said to us. So whenever we have a vacancy at a site, regardless of a reassignment or an appointment to replace, we go out and we talk to the site and interview the school staff and community members, and ask, what are you looking for in your next principal?

The intent of this platform was to obtain feedback from the school community as a whole and identify the traits and characteristics for the incoming principal. This input influenced the recommendations district superintendents presented to school boards for approval. Obtaining feedback from community members during the process of hiring a successor strongly considered the fit beyond qualifications. All superintendents relied on cabinet members to obtain as much information in order to include this criteria to the selection and recommendation of principal candidates.

When the search for a new principal was due to a replacement, eligibility requirements were connected to the area of concern for the predecessor. District C
Superintendent stated, “I’m going to look for somebody who was stronger in the area that I am concerned about.” An example supporting this position was:

If I had a principal at a school and the instructional program wasn’t moving forward because they weren’t a strong instructional leader, then I will strive to find a principal who will bring what that last principal was lacking to bear, to the game.

Each Superintendent verbalized that each time a new member joins the team, at the core of the decision was the notion of shared values aligned with shared experiences to support the improvement plan through district initiatives connected to the school-wide focus. Each shared a compatible philosophy in that they each considered community approval during the principal succession process. Each approached the decision with the intent to hire the most promising candidate embedded in a systematic recruitment and selection process. The challenge influencing the hiring of top-notch principals considered the impact of the appointment to ensure that the newly recommended leader was prepared to keep the school moving in the right direction.

Interview Process and Recommendations—Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources

The Assistant Superintendents for Human Resources used multiple screening phases with the intent to increase the quality of the candidates invited to interview for the vacant positions. An additional action associated with the screening process described by District B and District C was an effort to gather input through a community forum meeting. District B Assistant Superintendent stated, “The superintendent looks at the
criteria and information gathered through the process, and it gives him an idea of what to look for in the successor.”

Related to this finding, the District C Assistant Superintendent shared that members of the staff and community are invited to attend a voluntary meeting with the following intent: “We listen to what they want to tell us as criteria for the next principal; the input was typed up and provided to the interview panel members.” Specific criteria associated with the desire to hire the best match for the school governed the actions for the search. A blend of community input and district criteria created the platform in which the interviews occurred.

All three assistant superintendents shared about the standard process to ensure that the best candidate was invited to interview after a screening process. Searches appeared to follow a thoughtful and careful effort to fill principal vacancies. The process was described in phases; phase one was the screening process, phase two was the interview process, and phase three was the recommendation to the school board process. Each phase provided opportunities for interaction with specific members of the organization at the cabinet level. The interview process followed procedural safeguards as described in district policies established through board policies and administrative regulations. Table 8 identifies the district specific criteria shared during the study.

Once a candidate was recommended either through a reassignment or new hire for the vacant position, and approved by the school board, a plan to connect the newly appointed principal with the predecessor was attempted. This action was dependent on the time the hiring of the principal occurred and the reasons for the vacancy. District B Assistant Superintendent stated, “We try to hire the principal in time so that there was
### Table 8

**Interview Phases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>• Job Application</td>
<td>• Interview with superintendent</td>
<td>• Recommendation forwarded to the school board for approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Upgrading job descriptions to match current job market</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reference checks pre interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Invited to interview with principal interview committee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Top two candidate through ranking process move forward to next round</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>• Job Application</td>
<td>• Interview with cabinet members</td>
<td>• Recommendation forwarded to the school board for approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Score card adapted to match the school criteria</td>
<td>• Private interview with superintendent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reference checks post interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Invited to interview with principal interview committee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interview included a performance task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Three candidates identified through consensus process to move forward to next round</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>• Job Application</td>
<td>• Interview with cabinet members</td>
<td>• Interview with Superintendent and members of the school board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reference checks post interview</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Formal recommendation for approval at school board meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Invited to interview with principal interview committee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interview included a performance task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Two candidates identified through consensus process to move forward to next round</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
some shared time for the principal to shadow or work with the outgoing principal.” A more general examination of the findings suggested that the perception of this crossover period where the in-coming and out-going principals spend time with each other to exchange essential information is a common practice. Engaging the predecessor to support the acceptance of the newly hired or reassigned principal by the school community was considered but not necessarily required during the change in leadership experience. If a conversation between the incoming and outgoing principal occurred, it was initiated by the successor.

When assistant superintendents were asked, “What succession plan was in place to support newly assigned or appointed school principals?” all three described attempts to establish a timely form of succession support by connecting principals with department heads and differed in each district. District A shared that a newly hired principal was formally connected with an experienced principal who has demonstrated a high degree of success. The purpose for the meeting was to coach and establish a mentoring plan that was connected with the school’s current reality; “When a principal was new, we recommend that they get together with veteran successful principals once a month to talk about various issues that emerge as the school year progresses.”

District B Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources spoke about the desire to connect the outgoing and incoming principal for the purpose of transferring school information and to introduce the principal to the school community. He recognized that more needed to be planned with this aspect of succession planning. District C Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources focused on preparing the principal for the shift in leadership by pairing them with a mentor and shared the intent was to assign: “A
principal mentor who was a true leader, who has been in the position for some time, has demonstrated positive influence of others, and that was respected among the principal team.” Each spoke about the importance of establishing lines of communication as an element of the leadership transfer experience to support a positive impact of succession.

In instances where the outgoing principal was unavailable to partake in the succession transition experience, all three assistant superintendents described systems in place to support leadership transfers and to officially appoint the principal to a team within the organization. An executive director or member of cabinet was assigned to provide coaching and mentoring support, as needed, for the newly hired principal. District A shared that the district itself was divided up into areas, and each area was led by directors responsible for coaching and mentoring school administrators. Depending on the geographic location of the school, the area director was responsible for the orientation experience.

District B cabinet members described the Principal Lead structure as an added level of support for principals in general. This model divided the district into cohorts of schools for the purpose of leadership development under the direction of the Principal Lead. District C shared that each newly appointed principal had the autonomy to select a member of cabinet for the purpose of providing on-going coaching and mentoring support. Additionally, the principal formally met with all members of the cabinet and then decided with whom to partner, based on a variety of reasons. Once the connection was made, it was up to the principal to identify a meeting schedule that best fit their needs. Furthermore, the district was divided into areas creating principal teams under the professional learning community model. These meetings were led by area directors with
the intent to facilitate monthly meetings focused on aspects of leadership development selected by the members of the group.

Table 9 delineates the structures obtained through the research that reflect degrees of principal mentoring programs incorporated within each district. The focus was to connect newly hired principals with the culture of the organization and identify structures to form added support with the implementation of district initiatives. The expectation was that all principals, newly hired or veteran, embed this structure for on-going leadership development.

A recurring common factor for the recruitment and selection processes involved a series of decision points. The decision processes were characterized in multiple stages, multiple criteria, and shared decision making. All superintendents and assistant superintendents described the intent to hire a candidate that approached the work with the child in mind, was a strong instructional leader, and possessed strong interpersonal skills connected to principal acceptance by the school community at large. To ensure that a strong pool of candidates for the next generation of leaders was created, eligibility requirements strongly influenced the recruitment and selection experience. Each participant expressed the need to establish a strong process to support principal succession with the intent to ensure that the transfer in power produces a positive effect on the organization. Each cabinet level participant described informal and formal structures intended to respond to the phenomenon created when principal succession was inevitable.
### Table 9

*Principal Mentoring Structures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Cabinet level</th>
<th>Mentor</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A        | • Department Heads meet with new administrators | • Director assigned  
• Will identify support plan was needed  
• Need based on the number calls or issues at school site  
• Division leaders meet with new members  
• Monthly leadership meetings | • Monthly leadership meetings  
• Job Alike monthly meetings and cabinet members attend | • New principals recommended to seek out help  
• Outside support was provided |
| B        | — | • Executive Director assigned  
• Bi-weekly principals meetings | • Principal Lead assigned  
• Professional Learning Community Cohort | • Principal encouraged to work with cohort members |
| C        | • Principal handbook | • Principal selects a member of cabinet as mentor  
• Monthly Learning Leader meetings  
• Meet with Superintendent for goal-setting | • Effective veteran principal assigned  
• Beginning Principal Support and Assessment program  
• SDCOE Principal in Residence assigned for reassigned principals who need additional support | • Principal encouraged to work with area principals |
**Principal Pipeline**

Another theme that emerged from the study was the principal pipeline pathway. Cabinet members shared how each continuously searches for future potential principals with the intent to create a pool of strong in-house candidates to choose from as vacancies emerge. This action also connected with the purpose of supporting the organizations current practice. All shared that their journey to cabinet level position were directly influence by a site principal who encouraged them to pursue a principal position.

District C Superintendent shared, “I was encouraged to get my administrative credential, and so I did.” Each cabinet level participant described a reflective process to groom the next generation of leaders. District B Superintendent described succession planning as a state of being where “we all have to think that there was no position that will last forever, including mine. So even in my position, I’m thinking of when I leave, who will take the reins?”

All cabinet members shared in the intent to groom teacher leaders within the district. Each described structures specifically designed for that purpose. Table 10 identifies structures in place to form a pool of potential candidates.

Succession planning included envisioning where the organization should be and what steps are necessary to get there. District A Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources shared, “Each new candidate potentially brings new and fresh ideas so that we avoid group think and are constantly forcing ourselves to grow.” Tapping into the potential pool of highly qualified candidates from within the district was a common focus for all cabinet level participants. Table 11 describes structures available for candidates interested in a career in leadership.
Each cabinet member spoke about the need to attract, develop, and retain talented ready-to-lead principals as an approach to prepare them to step into future vacancies. A secondary perspective was to ensure that overall health of the district would be maintained. Candidates in the pipeline are essentially being prepared to take on leadership roles. This will support the continuity of organizational initiatives in place when a principal leaves.
Table 11

**Candidate Leadership Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
<th>District C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pipeline</td>
<td>• Professional Development Academies</td>
<td>• Aspiring Administrator Academies</td>
<td>• Intern Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Partnership with universities</td>
<td>• Site visits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage principals for “tapping”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Committees</td>
<td>• Bargaining</td>
<td>• Bargaining</td>
<td>• Bargaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Curriculum Planning</td>
<td>• Curriculum Planning</td>
<td>• Curriculum Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent Teacher Association</td>
<td>• Parent Teacher Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Leaders</td>
<td>• Professional Learning Community</td>
<td>• Professional Learning Community</td>
<td>• Professional Learning Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers on Special</td>
<td>• District level support provided by teacher leaders</td>
<td>• District Resource Teachers</td>
<td>• District level support provided by teacher leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACSA</td>
<td>• Professional Networking</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insider/Outsiders</td>
<td>• Looking for potential candidates to groom</td>
<td>• Partnerships with universities</td>
<td>• Looking for potential candidates to groom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Doctoral Programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data collected from the perspective of cabinet members indicate that the recruitment and selection practices in place to identify and appoint highly skilled principals was embedded in a rigorous process. Each member indicated that, once the recommendation was approved, support for the principal follows. A more general examination of the findings suggests that, although structures were described as a means to support principals, the principal perspective provided a different perspective of the actual experience. The following section will describe the findings during the research from the principal perspective.

**Principal Appointments or Reassignments**

To compare the perspective of principals and cabinet members with respect to the support received during the transition year, the examination of the data from the principal perspective was obtained when participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. Describe your personal principal placement or reassignment experience.
2. How have you learned from your succession experience, and what recommendations would you provide central office leaders?

Each principal participant described their lived experience and shared the realities faced during their first year in their current position. Table 12 provides contextual and background information for each principal appointment. These data heavily influence the successor success experience as described by each principal participant. Contact with the predecessor during the transition year was having influence by the reason for the vacancy.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Principal A</th>
<th>Principal B</th>
<th>Principal C</th>
<th>Principal D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A        | • Outsider recommendation  
          • Appointment due to predecessor reassignment within district  
          • Returned to the district as a principal  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previous experience as an assistant principal in previous district | • Outsider recommendation  
          • Appointment due to predecessor promotion to another district  
          • Arrived to the district as a principal  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previous experience as an assistant principal in middle school and high school | • Outsider recommendation  
          • Appointment due to predecessor reassignment to another school  
          • Arrived to the district as a principal  
          • Mid-year appointment  
          • Previous principal experience | — |
| B        | • Insider recommendation  
          • Elementary school reassignment made by superintendent  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previously a principal at another school within the district  
          • Served as an associate principal for 2 years in the district  
          • Began career as a teacher in the district | • Insider recommendation  
          • Elementary school appointment due the predecessor promotion at another district  
          • Mid-year appointment  
          • Previously associate principal at another site  
          • Arrived to the district as an associate principal | • Insider recommendation  
          • Elementary school appointment due to predecessor resignation  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previously associate principal at another site  
          • Worked as a teacher within the district | • Insider recommendation  
          • Elementary school appointment due to the reassignment of predecessor  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previously associate principal at another site  
          • Worked as a teacher within the district |
| C        | • Outsider recommendation  
          • Appointed to middle school position due to predecessor resignation  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Previous middle school experience as a principal  
          • Previous middle school experience as an assistant principal | • Outsider recommendation  
          • Appointed to elementary school position due to predecessor reassignment  
          • Beginning of the year appointment  
          • Principal experience at another district  
          • Associate principal experience at another district | — | — |
Principal Perspectives

The participants each described their experience beginning with the phone call they received from the district superintendent informing them about their recommendation for the principal position. All nine participants shared the same tendencies that, after the congratulatory statement was said, the reason for their appointment was due in large part they were what the school needed. In other words, they were the right fit for the school. Each participant described a mixture of excitement and nervous energy once they realized the impact of the news. When examining specific factors about the succession experience, each participant described that very little direction was provided after the phone call. They approached the succession transition on their own by taking the initiative to connect with their newly assigned school. Depending on whether the principal was appointed from within the district or as an outsider, their experiences revealed a common set of experiences during their succession year. The themes that emerged were:

1. Establishing relationships
2. District support
3. Succession transition and predecessor contact.

Establishing Relationships

To begin the process of succession, principals described how they approached connecting with the staff and school community by building relationships. All nine participants shared that they arranged to meet with staff members to obtain feedback about the culture and operations at the school site. All principals asked a variety of questions and scheduled appointments to meet with school staff either on a voluntary
basis during intercession, or reserved time during staff and teacher preparatory days. During these meetings, principals shared that the historical contextual background about the school became evident, which then allowed them to identify how to best proceed with the instructional program under their leadership.

**District A**

To focus on the school’s strengths and areas of need, Principal A asked simple questions: “What’s going really well at this school, and what do you think needs attention?” She approached the meetings recognizing that her appointment resulted in her predecessor reassignment due to ineffective leadership practices. The information she gathered spoke about the school culture and provided a baseline for the change process. During her data gathering phase, she also thought about her vision for the school and options to merge the current reality with where the school needed to head.

Principal B was reassigned 2 days prior to the start of the school year, and he did not have the time to meet with individual staff members from the onset. “I had to learn about the school, staff members, and community members on my own. It took me about 3 months to fully understand the structures that grounded the instructional program at the school.” He considered the current conditions of the school culture, overall achievement, and a possible plan to connect with district initiatives.

**District B**

Principal A recognized that in order to re-establish relationships with the staff, the approach was through a needs assessment approach due in large part to the healing that needed to occur in order to come together and move forward. The perceived reasons of her predecessor’s reassignment negatively impacted the culture among the school team.
With this in mind, the successor was careful not to push too hard as a way to establish trust.

Principal C shared that when her appointment was announced, the superintendent expressed to her, “Congratulations, there are a lot of relationships that need to be repaired, and that’s going to be your job, and there were a lot of needs at the school, and you are the right candidate for the school.” It was a brief conversation, and she did not receive any additional support for how to approach the work. She would have appreciated information connected to the historical context of the school besides achievement data. “Having that brief history helps with the approach of building relationships with the new staff.”

Principal D recalled the phone call she received from the superintendent informing her about her appointment; “You’re the next principal of this school, and I’m very excited for you to be there; it’s a very traditional school, and I know you’ll be able to make some great changes, and congratulations.” As an insider, she felt connected with key members of the cabinet that helped her work through basic functions required of a school principal. Her transition was a blend of support provided from her assigned Executive Director and colleagues throughout the year.

**District C**

Principal A met with staff members on a voluntary basis over the summer to build relationships and make connections with key players on the staff. She sent an email to the staff introducing herself and extended an invitation to meet with her on a voluntary basis. She based the conversation on a hook question to connect with the work of the school and as a way to get to know each other. Her question was: “What was important
for me to know about our school, and what recommendation do you have for me?” She also surveyed the staff to obtain feedback about what worked at the school and what challenges they faced from the previous year’s experiences. She was interested in learning about the past practices and how they felt about them. In that process, she realized that trust had been broken, and her role would reconnect the staff to their purpose through a collaborative approach.

Principal B described a cultural shift, as this was the first time she was working in an affluent school. She invested the time to establish relationships with families in the community because they were so heavily involved with the school. She met with key members of the staff and approached building relationships by connecting to the instructional program in place. She worked through teacher leaders and slowly unfolded her leadership vision through the established practices at the school site.

Mid-Year Appointments

The following principal experiences differed in that their appointments were made midyear. District B Principal B devoted time to establishing relationships with all groups of the school community. He stated, “It was very important to build enthusiasm around progression and creating a plan together.” To support site level work, relationships with members of central offices was key to align the site level work with district initiatives. He spent time with his assigned Executive Director with the intent to understand the historical context of the school. He also connected with key members of the school team in order to move the work forward under his leadership.

District A Principal C described her mid-year appointment experience with the following: “I spent the remainder of the year trying to survive the day-to-day tasks that
surface for a principal, while trying to implement the district initiatives.” She also spent time with the staff as a way to identify the current reality of the culture of the school and to identify areas of emphasis to move forward under her leadership.

When examining specific factors associated with the theme of establishing relationships, tendencies that became apparent were that the participants in the study valued the time devoted as a way to understand the current culture of the school community through the lens of restructuring. Establishing relationships with the school was vital, and each realized that this action was central during year 1 of their tenure. The investment of time connecting with staff and community members provided the necessary information that allowed each principal to identify where the change process would occur. The intent of gaining support from key members of the school staff was grounded on understanding the school’s characteristics, and needs, combined with the dynamic leadership style of each principal.

**District Level Support**

Each principal described structures in place at the district level intended to provide service and support with leadership development and utilized this level of service based on personal needs as challenges emerged throughout the school year (refer to Table 9 principal mentoring structures in place for each district). Accessing district level support differed in instances where the appointment or reassignment of the principal was within or outside of the district. Factors that emerged upon further examination of the data showed that principals who were insiders and established relationships with colleagues felt more comfortable asking them for help rather than enlisting the support from the assigned cabinet member. The recurring theme within this subtheme was the
concern of being negatively judged by district level management members due to the perceived ineffective application of technical skills in managing a school effectively.

District A

When sharing her experience about connecting with district level support, Principal A was familiar with the district’s policies and procedures for each department based on previous experience as an employee in the district. She did not hesitate to pick up the phone to obtain help and support from fellow principal colleagues because of previously established relationships. When thinking about the connections, she shared, “The best thing going for me was that I felt comfortable picking up the phone and calling people if I was in a bind.” She leaned on this level of support rather than contacting department heads. She worried about the perception by cabinet members with respect to her skills and abilities to manage the operations associated with the principalship.

Principal B recognized that every school runs differently within the district and depended on his previous experience to maneuver through those challenges in his reassignment. He found that the level of inconsistencies from one school to the next confounding with the implementation of district initiatives and therefore relied on the support from principal colleagues instead of district level cabinet members. “We have to rely, in terms of principals, on one another, so that becomes our lifeline into figuring out what we are supposed to do and how we’re supposed to do it.”

When speaking about district initiative implementation, Principal C had a previous working relationship with another principal, and she relied on his help when questions emerged. “I received the most support from my principal colleague with the day-to-day tasks during the year, while trying to implement the district initiatives.” She
worried that if too many requests for assistance were made by her, it might negatively impact the perception with respect with her skills to efficiently run a school.

**District B**

Principal A struggled with the Executive Director structure due to an emergence of a conflict in philosophy about the role of a principal during the first year of the appointment or reassignment. In her reassignment transition, she needed him to connect with her to understand how to approach the healing work associated with her new school, while balancing the pressures of increasing outcomes for students, as hers was the lowest performing school in the district. Furthermore, the reasons for the predecessor’s reassignment and lack of success adversely impacted the school culture. She stated, “He didn’t value reflection, he wanted test scores to go up.” As an experienced principal, she understood the work of reestablishing trust, and the message she received from her assigned mentor was, “He wanted me to come in like a hammer.” This approach differed from what she believed was needed to turn the school around. She was relieved when he was promoted, therefore offering an opportunity to work with a different Executive Director. “He wasn’t what I needed at all, and I didn’t feel like I was getting the support I needed from the district at that time.”

Principal B stated that the principal position was a lonely job in that much of the work was approached independently. He shared, “It’s important to identify members of the leadership team that can support you and also challenge your thoughts.” He looked at the Executive Director structure as a system to provide guidance and support, as he was evolving in his new position. He was encouraged to tap into this existing system by the principal he worked under, while he served as an associate principal within the district.
He also sought support through his interactions with other principals under the Principal Cohort model.

When I took over the school as a leader, I met with my assigned Executive Director, and it was beneficial to know who to contact when you needed something with Human Resources, Facilities, Special Education, or with matters related to student discipline and parent complaints. I viewed these connections with district personnel as beneficial, as I gained experience in my new role as a principal.

He recognized that connecting with successful veteran principals was incredibly important for the reflection process. “Asking for help was part of the experience.” Principal C shared that when the news of her appointment was made public, she was suddenly bombarded with requests for a meeting by individual staff members. Before meeting with staff, she arranged to meet with her assigned Executive Director to gain historical contextual information about the school’s experience under the predecessor’s administration and described the following: “We had a conversation to identify the immediate needs of the school in relation to the culture, dynamics, staffing, and to address the concerns about certain staff members.” She reflected that, although she was provided with limited information, she still felt like she was on her own to decide how to best proceed with establishing trust and engage in the necessary work to turn the school around. She also shared that although an Executive Director was assigned to her, the coaching and mentoring sessions scheduled were arranged far apart in frequency, and she really did not know how to prepare for these sessions. In her succession year, the meetings were oftentimes cancelled last minute. She stated, “They don’t necessarily have
the time, and it’s evident when they schedule meetings and then they cancel.” This occurrence worked against the intent of the support needed as a new principal. She shared, “What the Executive Directors don’t realize was that they think they are scheduling to meet with only with me, when, in reality, they were scheduling to meet with the school.” When appointments were cancelled, the impact was felt throughout the school.

Principal D reflected on the support she received as a first-year principal in the following way: “I found that I reached out to a lot of people because I had been working in the district as a teacher for 16 years and had known who I can trust and who I can call.” Although an Executive Director was assigned to her, she first relied on the support of a cabinet member with whom she shared a personal relationship. She went on to describe:

I feel like if I didn’t work in the district, I would be very lost. I called on the help of a cabinet member for the heavy lifting associated with work, such as the school achievement plan, the school budget, or matters related to student discipline.

With respect to the support from her Executive Director, she said, “My Executive Director helped me through the parent issues that emerged upon my arrival.”

**District C**

Principal A was hired from another district and described the challenge she faced as an outsider coming into the district. She was formally introduced at a leadership training and described:

My first experience with the district was with principals as opposed to the site. I can’t say that they were very welcoming at first, because I was an outsider; the principals were like a clique, and I felt like I didn’t fit in.
She described feeling more connected with cabinet members, due in large part to the interview process and connecting with them during the selection and recommendation experience.

Principal B shared that after she assumed her position, she was assigned a mentor as a part of the first and second year principal cohort. This system was grounded on a book study led by a designated mentor. She looked forward to the monthly meetings because they focused on a variety of areas of need and connected her with the district initiative work. Also in attendance were cabinet members responsible for providing training in the area of curriculum and support and human resources. She found this structure beneficial in that she learned how to manage daily tasks principals face. She appreciated the following level of support: “The new principal handbook was shared that contained a whole variety of resources to support us throughout the year.” She also described that her assigned mentor was a person she relied on routinely. She stated, “I would call her and reach out to develop a relationship to obtain her guidance.”

When examining factors associated with principal succession and the district level of support that was provided to principals, participants in this study shared their perceptions about the experience. Most principal’s preference was in networking with colleagues to address immediate questions and needs they had. Each participant in this study described taking the initiative to obtain the support from a fellow colleague because they felt more comfortable learning from the experiences of sitting principals connected with the realities of the work, and systems of the school environment within the district. Obtaining support from cabinet members was a secondary move connected more with coaching associated with district policies, and support to address parent concerns. This
level of support would be beneficial at a later time beyond the first year of the succession experience.

**Successor Transition and Predecessor Contact**

Principal succession affects the life of the school and was a change process grounded in the leadership styles, background, and the reason for the appointment or reassignment of the recommended candidate. Each participant in the study described the actions planned when they looked to connect with the existing school culture. None of the three districts had a predecessor exit plan that requires each to meet with their successor to support the transition. Each principal participant shared a similar experience when they learned of their appointment or reassignment, and further analysis showed that for all participants, their recommendation was connected to some form of school restructuring process. A pattern in the succession experience showed limited or no interaction with the predecessor. Each principal described a brief exchange if the person was still employed in the district. Depending on the experience under the predecessor tenure, each newly appointed or reassigned principal identified a contact person to provide information about the school’s characteristics, and this information was not necessarily obtained from the predecessor.

**District A**

Principal A described working closely with the school secretary, because the predecessor was no longer employed in the district. Under her predecessor’s leadership, she learned that the school culture was in need of repair. During her meetings with the staff, many expressed the following, “Just be here, just show up to help us, and address
our concerns.” This made it difficult to reach out to speak with the outgoing principal, and therefore they chose to begin the work from the ground up.

Principal B described the conditions of his reassignment with the following: “It was a quick experience, with a two-day notice by the Superintendent, and virtually no opportunity for communication with the predecessor.” He described having to spend time trying to figure out the structures in place. The school had an assistant principal who was new to the position, so this posed a set of challenges that hindered the relationship building piece due to the limited amount of time to prepare for the transition to his reassignment.

As an outsider, Principal C relied on the support of the predecessor who was employed in the district and whom she had known from previous experience. She also described how she was mindful not to overstep on that level of support because she recognized that he too was in a transition year and just as busy as she was. “At this point, as a new principal in the district, I took the initiative and quickly latched on to that person but didn’t want to burn out that person in the process.” This then led the principal to network with other principals in the district and grounded on deadlines associated with tasks at hand.

**District B**

Principal A struggled in her transition to her current site due to the experience with her predecessor. She reached out to her and asked, “What are some land mines that are out there that I should watch out for, and she said, nothing—there aren’t really any major problems here.” When researching the culture of the school, she was disappointed that department heads did not inform her about issues that they were dealing with under
her predecessors’ tenure. She shared, “I assumed that because this was the most failing school in the district, I assumed that there would be all this support.” She found her experience during her first year immersed in the reestablishment of basic structures necessary to run the school effectively.

Principal B relied on the support from the principal with whom he worked, who was also a Principal Lead, as an associate principal prior to his appointment. He spoke with him regularly for coaching and mentoring assistance during his transition. He shared, “I had very frequent contact with him and talk about leading a school, academics, he was my go to when I had issues that might be difficult for me.” His predecessor was no longer employed with the district and relied on his networking structures to get through the onset year of his appointment.

Principal C was unable to reach out to her predecessor, as she was no longer employed in the district and the conditions with her departure were awkward. She approached the communication with staff with discretion and used the feedback to assist her with the task of rebuilding the culture to focus on students and achievement. She reached out to her assigned Executive Director to engage in a conversation about the immediate needs of the school. She stated, “I reached out to find out what the immediate needs of the school were in relation to the culture, dynamics, staffing, and more of the concerns with staff members.” She proceeded to say, “Although this information was helpful, I proceeded using my own judgement to connect with the school community at large.”

Principal D described a 30-minute meeting where the predecessor provided some information about staff members, where files are stored, and what was important to know
about the historical perspective under their leadership. “She gave me information about red flags, who to trust, not trust, but not a whole lot of interaction after that.”

**District C**

Principal A did not speak with her predecessor, nor was she encouraged to do so by central office administrators. With the support of that Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, she began the process of rebuilding, with the intent to position the school for an International Baccalaureate program to reinvigorate the community, staff, and student body. “It became apparent to me that they needed somebody back at the school to reenergize the community and reenergize the school to remind us of our purpose and why we are special.”

Principal B shared that she briefly met with her predecessor and was provided with an overview of the school and staff. She also invited her to attend the end of year school function and begin the process of meeting members of the community. They established a system where the successor felt like she could reach out to her predecessor for help as needed. “I call her whenever I need to reach out to her—an example of that was classroom combos; I asked for her help to organize that system better.”

Predecessor communication was viewed by all principals as an essential component of the transition plan and was inconsistently carried out (see Table 13). Each principal expressed a strong desire to spend time with the predecessor as a way to obtain implicit information about the school known only to the outgoing principal. Learning about the system or organization, culture of the school, plans that were yet to be developed due to the departure, and crucial inside information only known to the
Table 13

**Predecessor Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District A</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Predecessor no longer employed in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Predecessor no longer employed in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>• Predecessor reassigned to another school within the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District B</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>• Predecessor reassigned within the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Predecessor no longer employed in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Predecessor no longer employed in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>• Predecessor reassigned to another school in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District C</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>• Predecessor no longer employed in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>• Predecessor reassigned to another school in the district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

predecessor, would have impacted the transition experience in a more favorable manner.

This missed opportunity was an area of concern for all principal participants.

Whether a principal was following someone who was successful or replacing someone who was not a good fit with the school, each newly appointed or reassigned principal looked to a variety of sources to find out as much as they could about the school’s feelings toward the predecessor. The legacy left behind influenced the actions by principals during the first few months of the principalship. These leadership actions were also connected with expectations set forth by the district superintendent or assigned
cabinet member leader who knew about the school. Most principals relied on their own skill set to prioritize areas in need of immediate change and those that would evolve over time.

**Recommendations for Cabinet Members**

When examining the effects of the principal succession experience, the school leaders in their new position analyzed and reflected upon their own approach to the manifestation of their lived outcome. Each participant was asked to share recommendations associated with the real support needed during the first year of the transition occurrence. Whether a brand new principal or a veteran principal in a reassignment, these findings examined the factors or circumstances that constituted the principal's transitions during the succession experience. Each shared the need to obtain information about the school’s past experience under the leadership of the predecessor in order to identify the appropriate approach for the transition process.

Upon further examination associated with the impact of the level of support cabinet members described to the perceptions principals have about those structures, a differential emerged. Most participants in this study described challenges about the realities of the position that they worked through on their own. The recommendations provided were directly connected with the need to inform cabinet members about the reality faced during the succession year. The themes that emerged were linked to mentoring and communication structures and the importance of transferring information about the school characteristic and the impact by the predecessor’s leadership.
Mentoring Structures

District A

Principal A would like to see a structure that assigns a person of contact to check in on me and my progress, having a go to person to ask honest questions without the fear of being judged, and lighten the workload on managerial tasks in order to put emphasis on the instructional leadership piece.

Principal B was concerned with the inconsistencies that exist with how schools are run. Specifically, connected to district initiatives and level of implementation each school takes on. He stated, “We as principals are expected to achieve district goals; however, we are not provided with a clear set of implementation outcomes for that purpose.” He also described a limited level of district support for implementation of district initiatives. To respond to this missing structure, he shared that “it forces principals to look to one another to seek clarification with implementation efforts.”

Principal C stated, “Even as an experienced principal, you still experience the growing pains that a rookie principal lives.” She recommended to further develop a system focused on principal leadership as a way to ensure that a systematic set of expectation is established in connection with district initiative implementation. She went on to suggest: “I would like to see a consistent campus walk-through schedule for on-going mentoring and coaching by district leaders.” Furthermore, she shared, “I haven’t had anyone come out to my school and say, ‘this was exactly what we want to see.’” To assist new principals to the real experiences about the position, a suggestion to provide a simple handbook that details all the essential information needed throughout the school
year would be beneficial and ensure a successful transition experience, especially as an outsider.

**District B**

Principal A expressed concern at her realization of how disconnected district leaders are with the pressures and challenges principals’ face daily. She stated that talking points were connected to student achievement, rather than her transition and steps to address the healing process that was needed. When describing the relationship with her assigned cabinet member leaders, she shared:

I felt like he didn’t really understand, he wasn’t what I needed at all, and instead he was putting me down at a time when I needed moral support, so I definitely didn’t feel any support coming from the district at that point.

This example of misalignment in communication during a time of undue stress increased the perception of a divide between cabinet members and site principals. A recommendation was suggested that under the direction of the assigned executive director, sit with both the predecessor and successor to review documents, files, budgets, staffing, and speak honestly about the issues connected to the school culture. The achievement data were published and included; however, an emphasis in analyzing the historical experience of the school may positively influence the changes in leadership administration.

Principal A shared that her recent experience demonstrated to her that principals in the district are scared to speak up and provide honest feedback about current realities within the organization. She said, “I think that a lot of the principals are scared, and that’s because of the culture in the district.” This was due in large part to the lack of
communication that exists in the organization. If she wanted anything for her school, she needed to strongly advocate for it and meet personally with department heads to plead her case.

Principal B stated that the Principal Cohort Model may be overwhelming for a new principal. Identifying another principal as a mentor or coach that was in the trenches, reduces the stress and provides an opportunity to establish a partnership of trust. The Executive Directors have their purpose, but working with a principal creates a different dynamic. He shared, “If you can find a mentor for every new principal that is strong and has that ability to support, but also challenge in a respectful way, I think that would really help out those of us who are new principals.”

Principal C suggested that a Principal Handbook be created as a level of support that contains all the answers to questions that come up to prepare you for the realities of the position that are not addressed in the administrative program. Mapping out the tasks and provide checklist will help immensely with the fluid operations of the school. When reflecting on the Executive Director (ED) structure, she shared: “Also, when you call another ED that was not your ED, they will say, you need to call your ED.” This concerned her, especially if she felt that she was not getting the support she needed from her designated ED. During the year, she sought to establish an expanded network of support within the established district level system because she recognized that they, too, are busy and may not always be available.

Principal D reflected on the executive director model in place at the district focused on coaching and mentoring principals. In her personal experience, she noted that when an ED has a dozen or more schools, time was a factor, and they may not be
available to provide timely support as deadlines emerge. She believed that “the ED structure works but would prefer to be paired up with another principal so that they can guide us through without the fear of judgement by district level leaders.”

Principal D stated, “The biggest learning this year was that you will always be learning; don’t be afraid to ask for help.” This perspective was connected to the insider experience and the connections in place by one or two colleagues who were willing to provide support as needed.

To conclude, Principal C stated that we need to actively seek out the support we need. She reflected:

It’s up to us to learn who we can trust. It’s been surprising to me to see the dynamic of how they interact with district personnel and being shut down doesn’t make me feel comfortable and makes me realize that I’m pretty much on my own. She shared that more needs to be developed to support principals in the areas that emerge as part of the year one experience. The message from cabinet members consistently reinforces to “feel free to ask me questions”; however, principals are not always aware of what questions to ask. The isolation factor that may emerge within the role of a principal is an area that needs to be further explored. What the data showed was that coaching and mentoring systems for newly appointed or reassigned principals that adapt to the evolution of skillsets that develop over time through experience was needed. Principals expressed a strong desire to establish a climate of trust in order to engage in honest conversations about what they needed to improve their effectiveness and impact. The perspective of principals linked to their perceptions about power influenced the degree of receptiveness of the mentoring and coaching support available by district level leaders.
Principals relied on the expertise of district level leaders and the connectedness to the school’s historical background as a pathway to a seamless transition during the first year of the appointment or reassignment.

**District C**

Principal A established a clear set of expectations for the transition plan. Predecessor did not provide information connected to the wide array of tasks associated with the middle school experience. She stated that as she attempted to uncover what structures were in place, she realized that was a perfect opportunity to reestablish policies and procedures that would move the school forward. However, the process took longer than expected but she did experience what this effort provided and with the staff. Principal B finds value in the principal mentor structure and also described a principal handbook resource provides a quick reference connected with the predictable year-long experience in the life of a principal.

Each of the participants found value in some form of resource to guide decisions linked to the year 1 experience. All agreed that being assigned a mentor principal with successful experience was needed, especially during the first year in the principal succession experience. The ability to engage in open and honest communication about the real challenges embedded in the role of a principal without fear of being judged was a crucial factor influencing the likelihood of future success. When asked to provide final thoughts, the responses supported the need to strengthen trust in order to evolve in the new role.
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction and Overview

Planning for leadership development and succession is vital to any organization. The purpose of this study was to examine the principal succession experience from the perspective of cabinet members, and newly appointed or reassigned principals completing year 1 in their assignment. The experience was captured through semi-structured interviews, and participants in the study worked in either an urban and suburban district. This qualitative case study offers a description of key issues school principals face during the first year in their new positions, regardless of the years of previous experience in leadership roles. The intent of the research was to explore the dynamics that embodied the newly appointed or reassigned principal’s succession experience.

This study aimed to add to the existing body of literature about principal succession and the impact such a change has on a school organization. Research findings will be discussed in this chapter and connected to the study’s four research questions. This chapter also includes a section on implications and a discussion about the outcomes of the examination of principal succession plans from two perspectives—those of cabinet members and principals. To conclude, suggestions for future research about the topic highlight the need to further investigate principal succession from the perspective of job migration between the outgoing and incoming principal, and using that predecessor cross-over experience to support principals during the first-year transition.

Although the selection of a skilled school principal goes through a multi-level process, the search begins long before vacancies arise; cabinet members and principals need to think about their successor from the day they accept and assume their position.
The superintendent from District A stated, “During the course of any given year, we always are in the process of looking to promote and appoint people and/or advertise in or out of the district.” Leaders understand and search for their successor is an on-going process. When considering replacement planning, the superintendent from District B shared, “I have to think that there is no position that will last forever, even in my position. I’m thinking of when I leave, who will take the reign in my cabinet?” Leaders are mindful that the next generation of successors is presently in the field, and it is their responsibility to groom the next generation of leaders.

This chapter presents the data collected during the research study related to the four research questions connected with the principal succession event:

1. If the principal is critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the reassignments is influence by their predecessor, what succession plan is in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurs with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?

2. Many school organizations lack a systemic method for principal selection that may ultimately lead to a recommendation of an unsuitable candidate, thus negatively impacting a school organization. Why then are school districts lacking a principal succession plan?

3. When examining how an organization actively seeks and recruits competent school leaders skilled in supporting district initiatives embedded in improvement plans, how does succession planning fit into an organizations strategic plan?
4. How do school districts arrange for a continuous system of leadership support to build capacity and ensure an efficacious implementation of improvement plans?

Recognizing that in an era of increased pressure to meet the demands of accountability standards, finding a school leader possessing the skillset necessary for the improvement process is critical. Research strongly supports the fact that the leadership of the school principal has a direct impact on the climate of the school and, in turn, on student achievement (Marks & Nance, 2007; Norton, 2003; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2005). Leaders need to understand and recognize that the search for their successor is an on-going process and one that begins when the appointment is confirmed. A principal who looks for and develops future leadership talent is adding to the pool of candidates who will one day lead the organization.

A change in leadership may impact a school’s culture due to the belief that leaders are inherently viewed as a source of stability to a school systems. A succession in leadership may make it difficult to maintain ongoing successful systems that ultimately impact the established teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, the presence of the predecessor may influence leadership actions taken by the newly appointed or reassigned principal. Further examination of predecessor engagement may identify succession structures to lessen the impact during the change process. The data showed that in the three districts, principal succession planning was grounded on recruitment, principal pipeline, job migration, leadership development, and coaching and mentoring support. An area not included was predecessor engagement during the orientation phase of the transition experience.
Summary of Study Findings

This study contains the perspective of cabinet members in leadership positions and principals who recently completed their first year in their new assignment. The data from the interviews were analyzed for themes and subthemes that matched the position held of participants. Cabinet level members were asked to describe the process utilized to fill principal vacancies, the support provided once the leadership transition occurred, and principals were asked to describe their experience during the first-year transition. To that end, the interview results were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were coded for themes and subthemes and sorted by categories, cabinet member’s perspectives, and school principal’s experiences.

When searching and recruiting for highly qualified candidates to fill vacancies, superintendents and Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources were asked to describe their organizational recruitment criteria, selection process, and final decision point when recommending a candidate to the school board for approval. These intentionally designed structures were focused on identifying candidates who were highly skilled, and shared the same values as the organizational system. Hooker (2000) found in her research about the principal selection process through superintendent interviews:

Even though the recruitment and selection of building level administrators involve numerous real-world decisions in organizational context, there is little in the literature on how and why building level administrators are recruited and selected for particular positions. There are very few published studies of any kind on recruitment and selection of building level administrators and not from an organizational perspective. (p. 183)
From the principal’s perspective, all described possessing the necessary skills to meet the expected demands and complexities of the job. Nevertheless, all faced challenges with respect to connecting with the existing school team, identifying characteristics of the school culture, implementation of school’s improvement plan, and the time factor associated in developing relationships with the school community at large during their transition year. Each principal shared that the instructional leadership component of the position was a secondary priority due to the fact that, in order to move the team in a new direction, trust grounded on honest relationships needed to be in place. Each principal devoted time to connecting with members of the team, student body, and community members.

**Common Themes: Cabinet Members and Principals**

During the examination of the data, the themes that emerged about principal succession were categorized into two sets, cabinet members and school principals. The data analysis from the perspective of superintendents and Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources revealed five themes:

1. Reason for the appointment
2. Selection criteria and recruitment
3. Interview process and recommendations
4. Principal pipeline
5. Principal succession transition plan.

When examining the transcripts of principal interviews, the themes that emerged were:
1. Establishing relationships with school community

2. Mentoring and support

3. Succession transition; predecessor contact and exodus.

Upon further examination of the data within each categories, shared subthemes by both groups emerged:

1. Rigid process for eligibility

Post appointment or reassignment:

2. Successor success

3. Approachability

4. Principals themselves viewed as an asset to organization.

**Succession Planning From the Perspective of Cabinet Members**

**Reason for the Appointment**

*Research Question 1: If the principal is critical in setting the tone for a school, and the impact of the reassignments is influenced by their predecessor, what succession plan is in place to ensure that the transition in leadership occurs with limited disruption to the effectiveness of the school?*  The researcher investigated how cabinet members in leadership positions approached principal succession planning. All three superintendents described a rigid method for identifying candidates that were a fit for the district and the vacancy as part of their succession plan. Each looked for and recruited candidates that met general criteria described in the job posting that were aligned with desirable principal qualities. The basic management skills associated with the principalship were areas that would advance through on the job experience combined with the right mentoring and support. Moreover, the interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and influence factor,
were the focal potential candidate needed to possess from the superintendent’s viewpoint. During the onset of the search, the needs of the school were also identified and included in the search.

It was expected that the required skills each superintendent was looking for in a candidate would emerge during the interview phase because of the types of questions and scenarios that were included during the process. The intent was to uncover the candidate’s true essence within the leadership realm. As District C Superintendent stated when searching for a principal, “You know what you’re looking for, what you want, and when you meet the right person, you just know. I want that person to think like I do, believe like I believe, and grow in the position.”

The selection of the principal was also influenced by the reason for the vacancy: natural promotion, retirements, or resignations. In situations where the vacancy occurred due to a natural promotion or retirement, the process was approached from a vantage point to add new energy to the team. The search was wide, and outside candidates were looked at more closely and added to the current pool of inside candidates. In situations where the vacancy occurred due to the predecessor not being the right fit for the school resulting in a resignation, the perspective differed. The reasons that led to the predecessor’s dismissal heavily influenced the search. Each superintendent looked closely to identify what factors contributed to the lack of success by the predecessor’s leadership administration in order to avoid repeating the same mistake and to learn from the experience. To support this finding, the Superintendent from District B stated, “What I try to do is an autopsy of the situation and work with my cabinet to identify what happened and what did we do wrong?” Reflecting on the experiences when considering
the reason for the vacancy provided each superintendent the platform in identifying desirable successor qualities in order to move the school forward.

All six cabinet members referenced the fit for the vacancy, and this was further characterized through the community forums that were part of the hiring process. In Baron’s (1990) study of selection and recruitment of principals through the superintendent’s perspective, he reported on one such finding connected to the candidate’s compatibility and acceptance by the community that the school serves. He noted:

The most obvious is that a principal must be knowledgeable of, and accepted by, the constituents of a local system to function effectively. An alternative possibility, however, is that there may be a strong political component to hiring practices among public school superintendents. (p. 8)

Superintendents looked for candidates that shared the values of the organization through searches inclusive of stakeholder input when filling principal vacancies. Furthermore, that data showed that all three approached the task of recommending a candidate that added to the system in place and finding the right fit based on the current needs of the school. The needs of the school were determined by the impact of the predecessor’s administration connected mainly in the area of overall student achievement. In situations where the predecessor experienced a lack of success, a number of factors were considered: fit, misalignment of leadership style, and skillset. Each superintendents described a process to identify where the failure occurred in the system in order to improve the support of new principals. This reflective process then identified those qualities that were missing in the predecessor and influenced what to look for in the
These discussions occurred behind closed doors at cabinet meetings. Davidson and Taylor (1999) shared that when considering the successor, “the likelihood of a successful principal succession is greatly enhanced when district personnel consider the characteristics of the school and obtain input from the faculty as to the type of leadership needed at the school” (p. 22).

The identification and recruitment process was designed on common practices associated with posting, reference checks, screening process, and tiered interview phase, to final recommendation and appointment. When reassignments were considered, the success rate and previous experience of the principal influenced the decision. Cabinet members considered the impact of the predecessor’s administration, as reflected by student achievement and status of the school climate. None of the three districts described a formal plan for predecessor cross-over time, or job migration, as part of the orientation experience for the incoming principal. However, if principal succession planning is solely identified as the process of hiring replacements, each district functioned within an established procedure that identified highly qualified candidates for the replacement practice. The predecessor, as part of the replacement process, was limited to the impact the leadership administration had on the school site and did not formally identify contact or successor orientation practices as part of the principal succession plan.

**Recruitment Process**

*Research Question 2: Many school organizations lack a systemic method for principal selection that may ultimately lead to a recommendation of an unsuitable candidate, thus negatively impacting a school organization. Why then are school districts lacking a principal succession plan?* All three districts had a succession plan
inclusive of the recruitment policies when looking to fill principal vacancies. A large quantity of time was invested in identifying candidates to invite for an interview.

The Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources primarily viewed principal succession planning as the process of recruiting and selecting replacements for vacancies. Each described their district’s approach for sifting out viable candidates to invite for the interview process. During the recruitment process, the historical background of the school, combined with characteristics that the superintendent valued, were the influencing factors for the paper screening and recruitment phase. This was especially true for outsiders who may not share in the district’s current initiative work. Additionally, each assistant superintendent used the data gathered during the community forum event as a basis for the search linked to the current school culture and climate established under the predecessor administration. Their role in this succession planning phase was to facilitate a conversation with community members and sift out the desirable traits for the successor.

When taking into account attributes associated with the impact of a leadership change on the culture of the school, Engels, Hotton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, and Aelterman (2008) found that principals who established a positive school culture shared common traits: “It is important for leaders to communicate clearly on their vision and their expectations and, at the same time, stimulate and value teachers initiative, and provide support and feedback” (p. 14). All superintendents and Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources concurred that filling a principal vacancy is a crucial appointment that required a thoughtful process inclusive of all stakeholders input.
The recruitment process each district subscribed to was intentionally challenging in order to sort out the best match and ultimately recommend a candidate who mixed well not only with the school community, but with the organizational leadership team, as well. Both sets of cabinet leaders agreed that part of the responsibility connected to the leadership staffing process was growing the next cohort of leaders in order to maintain the vitality of the organization for generations to come. It is important to note that the principal succession plans for each district primarily focused on the search for the replacement. All cabinet members agreed that more needed to be developed to formally identify an exit plan for the predecessor that focused on arranging a job migration or orientation experience where crucial information was exchanged between the out-going and in-coming principal. The goal of ensuring for a smooth transition with minimal disruptions can help the successor adapt to the new assignment and help the school community embrace the new leadership administration.

**Principal Pipeline**

*Research Question 3: When examining how an organization actively seeks and recruits competent school leaders skilled in supporting district initiatives embedded in improvement plans, how does succession planning fit into an organization’s strategic plan?* The three superintendents subscribed to the belief that every leader in their current position is already thinking about their replacement. At a time where highly qualified principal candidates shortages loom, Fink (2011) stated, “Pools expand leadership capacity by using of resources of time, money, and human energy effectively, and since good development positions like assistant principal are limited in number, providing [sic] an alternative development opportunity for valued staff members” (p. 675). Looking
heavily at the current talent pool for succession planning was a mutual aspect that all three superintendents and assistant superintendents described. The viewpoint of growing the pool of potential candidates that possess desirable leadership skills—good communicator, politically and socially savvy, strong emotional intelligence, innovative vision for the implementation of district initiatives, and influence to grow leadership capacity—is the emphasis for identifying potential.

Tapping (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Fink, 2011; Kim, 2010; Myung et al., 2011; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2005) was utilized to encourage potential candidates to participate in a variety of committees in order to obtain leadership experiences. Cabinet members shared that it was the responsibility of current leaders to develop other leaders with similar characteristics as part of the replacement planning obligation. All three districts described an aspiring administrator structure as a means to “grow their own.” In this career lattice structure, teacher leaders, school administrators, and district leaders were positioned to move their way up through district ranks. For aspiring principals, the aspiring administrator intern programs were designed to produce future high quality school leaders to keep the system moving in the same direction.

District A looked heavily at the assistant principal pool within the district for principal succession planning. This was also due in large part that principals do not get reassigned much in the district. The Deputy Assistant Superintendents for Human Resources shared that they like to hire from within in order to maintain institutional knowledge and perpetuate the current district’s culture. Monthly assistant principal academies were planned and focused on developing critical leadership skills to hone in on the skills needed for the principal position. However, the deputy assistant
superintendent did not identify collective responsibilities held by principals to support leadership development for their assistant principals. Building the leadership capacity was a task assigned to the human resources department. The primary outcome was to position each assistant principal for future higher leadership positions.

District B described an Aspiring Administrator Academy structure as part of their succession plan and is available for teacher leaders interested in pursuing future administrative positions. These monthly meetings focus on a variety of topics relevant to the role on the principalship and connected participants with access to district committee work. The approach for leadership development through the lens of principal succession planning was informal and completely dependent on the participants. The district superintendent, however, did speak about the associate principals and their responsibility to grow into the principal position. Each associate principal was expected to go through the interview process as vacancies became available as a means to demonstrate the capacity to meet the demands entrenched in the principalship. A 2- to 3-year growth plan for each associate principal was embedded in the life-span of the position. If during that window the associate principal was unsuccessful in gaining a principal appointment within the organization, they were reassigned back into the classroom.

District C proved to have a more comprehensive approach to leadership development through their Administrative Intern Program. Their model is a formal 2-year program open for teachers within the district possessing an Administrative Credential and demonstrating leadership capacity. This inside structure was available to candidates that were recommended by their current principals and a required portfolio development grounded to a wide range of leadership tasks. Each intern was expected to
complete the 2-year program to position themselves for future leadership positions. Most principals in this district were insiders who moved up in the leadership ranks.

Leadership development varied between all three districts; however, all shared in the belief that it was every leader’s responsibility to grow the next generation of leaders. District A approached the task by investing time and resources in the assistant principal pool. District B included a monthly Aspiring Administrator Academy for teacher leaders that was open to interested members in the organization. With respect to associate principals, leadership development was a primary responsibility of the principal and identified tasks for leadership and networking opportunities as part of their growth plan. As for District C, this district had a formal Intern Program developed over a 2-year time commitment. Completion of the program positions participants for future consideration of principalship as vacancies became available within the district. These three varying structures were meant to provide career lattice opportunities focused on leadership development for members within each organization. The networking opportunity embedded in the structure was meant to expand the leadership sphere for interested participants. These models were each district’s approach to ensure successor success by investing in the development of essential skills to be applied once a candidate moved into the principalship.

**Leadership Support for Successor Success**

*Research Question 4: How do school districts arrange for continuous system of leadership support to build leadership capacity and ensure successor success?*  The current recruitment system for all three districts approached the task of filling vacancies as they became available with a clear and strategic intent. The initial requisites for
principals were connected to possessing sound instructional leadership experience, sufficient managerial capabilities, clear communication skills, political savvy, strong emotional intelligence, and the ability to influence and grow leadership capacity among teacher leaders. Once the principal was selected and appointed, a mentor was assigned to provide support in the areas associated with district initiatives, school improvement plans, further leadership development, and additional areas, as needed. Principals were matched with senior leaders with like leadership styles and personalities. However, what was noted was that maintaining a consistent mentoring partnership was lacking as shared by the principals.

Although each cabinet member believed that the current system focused on mentoring and coaching of new principals was beneficial, the principals’ perspectives differed as they described feeling more comfortable seeking support from their colleagues. This perception may have been due also to factors associated with senior leaders’ scheduling difficulties, disconnect between the perceived needs of the school when compared to the current reality principals faced, or a misalignment with philosophies about where the school needed to go next. Each principal described times during the year working independently and reaching out to a selective few for help and support. This was especially true when principals needed help in clarifying district initiatives and tasks associated with improvement plans, staffing, and budgetary decisions. Principals worried about being judged and not viewed as an asset to the organization. When describing the pressures associated with the implementation of district initiatives, Principal B from District A described, “We are expected to implement
curriculums and program; however, there is no specific implementation framework, leaving us to rely on other principals for support.”

Furthermore, school principals described an expectation to establish and support a positive climate while addressing the goals of the school. The data showed that because so much of the time was focused on establishing relationships, the instructional leader role was not the primary emphasis during the first year in the new assignment. To identify balance between the instructional needs of the school and the need to build relationships, Principal A from District C shared:

In asking the staff questions about why, it was good because then I could follow up, and it’s given me an in, to ask questions and make them aware of practices that needed to change to guide us to where I knew we were headed.

Although instructional leadership is perceived as the primary role of the principal by the community at large, each principal shared spending little time with those types of duties during their first year. Brundrett and colleagues (2006) noted:

There is a strong commitment to leadership and management structure which encourage or require all staff to take on active leadership roles, and thereby to develop skill in decision-making and allied leadership skills. (p. 265)

The primary focus was to establish relationships with the school community at the expense of implanting the necessary changes to move the school forward. Each principal recognized that improvement would evolve during subsequent years of their tenure. Their primary focus was to establish connections, fit in, and gain acceptance by the members of the school community.
The general feeling about the network of support for principals by cabinet members in leadership positions was viewed as a strength in the principal succession plan. A subtheme that emerged within this broader theme through the perspective of principals was that these relationships, although well intended, oftentimes were not consistently maintained throughout the year. Establishing and maintaining a network for principals by experienced leaders is observed as a crucial level of support by principals.

Whitaker (1999) found:

Some districts also provide induction and mentor programs for new principals. In these programs, principals are paired with a mentor whose responsibility is to help the principals with difficult issues, problem solve, and offer support given the realities of the job. (p. 361)

District A assigned directors as mentors, supporters, and trainers for the new principals. If a principal had been reassigned, the expectation is to continue the previously established partnership and follow the principal to their new school. The emphasis was to expand on the mentoring relationship and continue to provide the support needed based on experience and skillset. Monthly job-alike meetings focused on agenda items identified among the group. These agenda items were generally connected to district initiatives.

District B endorsed the delivery of coaching and mentoring support provided by Principal Leads and Executive Directors. Through the process of reflection, senior leaders were expected to provide individualized and differentiated support to assigned principals. The superintendent described the importance of regularly reflecting on the impact principals have on the school site and shared, “It’s important to support new
principals, especially if they come from outside of the system.” Tending to the support needed for principals and the complex role of leadership, Whitaker (1999) states, “Understanding the changing and demanding role of principals is critical to those already in the profession as well as those aspiring to the principalship” (p. 360). Each newly appointed principal was assigned an Executive Director for mentoring and coaching support. Quarterly meetings and classroom walk-throughs were planned where the principals engaged in reflection to grow their instructional leadership, based on the outcome of the classroom practice currently in place at the school. In addition, each principal was a member of a cohort led by a principal lead. The structure for this level of leadership development was established by members of the cohort. Each cohort within the district identified a focus and planned meetings for follow-up and monitoring of district initiative implementation.

With respect to the predecessor administration that established current instructional practices at the site, District B Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources was the only participant to speak about principal succession from the viewpoint of predecessor and successor sharing time. He recognized that the predecessor’s presence was very much entrenched in the culture of the school. He spoke about the need to help the successor gain trust as quickly as possible. He saw value in arranging cross-over time between the predecessor and successor. He also shared that timing for this to occur was important and challenging to manage. In the absence of the predecessor, a Principal Lead and Executive Director was assigned to provide the necessary information about the school as part of the principal transition experience.
District C had a multilayered system for principal mentoring and coaching. One structure was the Area Principal model where a successful, highly respected, senior principal was assigned to lead a number of schools within their assigned area and establish an additional platform focused on leadership development. These cohorts of principals met monthly and focused on the implementation of district initiatives. Additionally, new principal academies were scheduled 1 hour before monthly leadership learning meetings. This program was named Beginning Principal and Support Academies and was designed for principals in the district with less than 3 years of experience. The meetings were led by the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, and the emphasis was to review a variety of resources from the district’s principal binder.

To conclude, cabinet members did not express concern connected to the challenges a principal might face during the first year in the appointment. Each described an interest in positioning the principal with a coach or mentor to provide assistance with the managerial aspects of the position. Principals in turn shared the challenges they faced within the scope of developing relationships with the school team and identifying how to proceed with the implementation of the established school improvement plan. The differing perspectives are more evident within the principal perspective as each participant described the isolation that emerged when faced with the realities about the principalship experience. The principals in this study all concurred that a succession plan that places equal importance to the post-appointment transition experience needs to be further developed. Including the predecessor in the experience is needed.
Succession Experience Principal Perspective

The interview questions for principals were designed to gain an understanding of their lived experience during the first year in their appointment. The researcher attempted to uncover common factors about the transition experiences and compare them to the perspectives of cabinet members from the within the organization in which the principals were employed. As Jones and Webber (2001) noted, “Principal succession significantly affects the life of a school” (p. 6). Each principal shared information about their journey and the challenges they faced during the first year. The central point of the investigation was: How are newly appointed or reassigned principals supported during the succession transition event?

Relationships

The principals in this study identified building relationships and establishing trust with their school team as the primary focus during their transition year. Although each approached the task of making connections with members of the school community differently, one tendency became apparent—identify the key players on the school team in order to obtain support for the change in leadership. Each principal had hoped to spend time with the predecessor in order to merge with the culture of the school he or she was leaving behind. Principals also expected to receive information about the school’s experience under the predecessor’s administration to ease the transition and adapt to the new environment as part of the succession plan.

Whether the information was provided by the predecessor or a member of cabinet, each principal shared that limited information about the school was provided. Each principal described attempts to understand the school’s culture to identify steps to take to
fit in as seamlessly as possible during the transition into their appointment or reassignment. Only four of the nine principals shared having predecessor contact. Furthermore, in instances where the predecessor experienced a lack of success, the exchange was described with a tone of competitive dissonance rather than a collaborative feel. Principal A from District B shared, “She didn’t give me a lot of information about the school, and when I asked about some of the land mines that I should watch out for, she said there weren’t any major problems here, when I knew different.”

For the principals who did describe an informal cross-over time experience with the predecessor, it was more of a symbolic move. An example from the data was evident in the experience shared by Principal B District C: “The predecessor invited me to meet with her and give me a summary of the school and community, and briefed me on people I needed to know and meet.” Predecessor communication depended on the perceived value of the exchange by the individual principals. In all three districts, predecessor engagement, as part of the exit plan, was not a formalized action or expectation in the transition experience.

**District Level Support**

All leadership team members in the three districts described a mentoring and coaching structure to support successor success. Each plan relied on the help and support by assigned senior leaders within the organization. The process began by matching principals with mentors for leadership development and implementation of district initiatives. Although all nine principals spoke about the partnerships with senior leaders of the organization, every principal described feeling more comfortable with a colleague, rather than a member of cabinet. When examining specific factors associated with this
position, principals expressed concern about being negatively judged and therefore not viewed as an asset to the organization. Another related finding connected to the mentoring structure was that the interactions between principals and cabinet members were viewed as a supervisory role rather than a coaching opportunity. All principals hesitated in confiding honest feelings and opinions with the challenges they faced with their assigned mentor and felt more comfortable seeking support from fellow principal colleagues. From the perspective of principals, the level of support provided by cabinet members was restricted to superficial conversations about the daily operations of the principalship.

**Predecessor Contact**

Each principal shared feeling a mixture of emotions, particularly feeling intimidated at the precise moment of officially taking control at their school. The predecessor therefore was viewed as a key player that would somehow provide comfort and encouragement during the switching of the guard. A noteworthy result was that none of the districts employed an exit plan for the predecessor that focused on spending time with the successor. Additionally, for all nine principals, limited information about the predecessor’s departure was shared. Each principal recognized that this was an influencing factor that would assist with their transition. Each wanted to pick up where the other left off. All recognized that in order to achieve the goal of taking the school to new levels of learning, productivity, and achievement, predecessor contact was viewed as desirable. This was especially true if the predecessor resigned due to a lack of leadership success. The principals recognized benefits in arranging to spend time with the predecessor; however, the data showed that the contact was up to the successor. In
examining principal succession structures, there did not appear to be a formal policy connected to predecessor and successor communication as part of the outgoing principal’s exit plan. Additionally, all three Assistant Superintendents of Human Resources recognized that predecessor and successor cross-over time was an area to be further explored and may have a positive impact during the change process.

The presence of the predecessor in a school culture is ever-present, whether the administration was perceived as effective or ineffective. Engels and colleagues (2008) studied the impact of principals in schools with a positive school culture and noted that “leadership remains difficult to understand because of the many personal, contextual and contingent factors that affect the principal’s position and behaviours” (p. 14). The departure of the predecessor presents an opportunity to exchange critical information with the successor about the school’s historical information and is a factor to consider for successor success. Regardless of the circumstances associated with the departure of the predecessor, a clear set of criteria for an exit plan focused on the orientation and exchange of school information was a missing component of existing systems for principal succession. Each principal described a strong desire to include this aspect as part of the symbolic transition in leadership moves. This study confirms that the predecessor and successor contact is a component that is lacking in all three district’s principal succession plans.

All principals recommended that an orientation plan be included in the succession plan. This would include planning for the incoming and outgoing principal to spend time together in order to exchange information about the school’s experience and needs. It was also recommended to establish a system of organization with respect to information
about the school’s improvement plan, school budget planning, staffing procedures, staff evaluations, and parent engagement structures. Each principal expressed a strong desire to leave their school better organized than how they found it. For all principals, adapting to the current system of organization was challenging. These recommendations may alleviate the hardships a change in leadership presented to each of the principals by providing information about what was under the predecessor’s rule, and to plan for what will be under the new leadership administration.

**Implications for Future Research**

Information gathered from this study indicated that there is a gap between cabinet member perspectives with respect to principal succession planning and the principal’s experience during the first year in the leadership assignment. Where cabinet members felt strongly about structures in place to recruit and hire highly qualified candidates, support for principals during their transition year needs further development. Principals expressed the need for different kinds of support to make it through the critical first year in their appointment. When principals were asked to make recommendations for increased successor success, each principal wanted to have a clear orientation plan focused on predecessor contact, a system of organization containing information connected to the predictable tasks of the principalship, and resources to assist principals with establishing relationships with the school staff and community at large.

In the absence of a predecessor exit plan, all principals determined how to best obtain information about the multi-layered levels of responsibilities found within the principalship. Each principal described having to devote much of their time in establishing operational structures and, oftentimes, worked independently. With a
focused plan that provided relevant information about the realities of the position, principals expressed that the outcome of the year 1 experience may have been different. When examining specific factors associated with the coaching and mentoring system, barriers interfering with the partnership were impacted by the many demands of the day-to-day work requirement for both principals and cabinet members.

With respect to leadership development, this is the collective responsibility of all leaders in identifying the next generation and building leadership capacity among members who are interested in the upward career movement. To address the undercurrent of principal succession, Fink (2011) stated, “Successful leadership succession, therefore, really depends on the purposes of educational jurisdictions and how well their prospective leaders can meet organization goal” (p. 674). Partnerships with university preservice programs is an area to be further explored. Aligning coursework with the complexities of the position allows preservice students the opportunity to develop primary skills necessary for the initial entry to the principalship. The secondary and tertiary evolution will occur on the job through experience, especially in districts with principal succession plans that deliberately prepare to meet the evolutionary needs of the principal over time.

**Discussion**

Principal succession systems focused on successor success in meeting the challenges associated with a change process, specifically during the first year, may be further enhanced with predecessor involvement. Moreover, expanding on the mentoring and coaching system focused on continuous leadership development for principals and grounded of trust may enrich the existing culture of district organizations. Viewing the
principal transition experience as an opportunity to improve the interdependence within
the organization may also address the concerns connected to trust and confidentiality for
district level mentors. Another discussion point is replacement planning. When
candidates find themselves in leadership roles, thinking about their own replacement
needs to be part of the experience. By doing so, the current principal will establish
structures and ensure that the system runs effectively in their absence.

Another aspect to further examine is the idea of a predecessor exit plan for
leadership succession. The intention of this plan is to bring forth the dialogue needed
in the leadership transition experience. A well-thought-out plan communicates to the
organization that successor success is vital and includes the predecessor as part of the
experience. Thinking about succession planning in terms of replacement planning can be
a possible starting point focused on leadership development into an organization with the
intention of establishing a systematic approach to principal replacement. Planning for
and anticipating vacancies due to promotions, resignations, and retirements will ensure
that an organization establishes a healthy pool of highly qualified candidates from which
to choose. Whether following someone who was successful or replacing someone who
was not a good fit with the school, finding out as much about the feelings towards the
predecessor will influence the successor recommendation.

**Concluding Thoughts**

During this study, a shortage of research about principal succession impacted the
intent to uncover practices in place to ensure for the successful transition of leaders
within the educational field. Effective succession planning can benefit school districts
in critical ways and ensure continuity in schools with a positive culture. A change in
leadership is inevitable and organizations need to consider the predecessor’s participation in their successor selection. Thiemann (1968) contributed to the study on the phenomenology of the succession transition and noted:

No predecessor knows when or under what conditions the office will be passed on nor can he be certain who will succeed him, the results of the succession, or its final end. Succession, then, as a perennial phenomenon of man’s organization needs to be studied and theories need to be developed so that the dysfunctional consequence can be minimized by understanding the relationship between the variables and increasing predictability. (p. 6)

The results of this study may be used to assist superintendents in focusing on expanding on principal succession plans to include clear guidelines for the predecessor involvement. This may be included in the evaluation process where principals are thinking about their replacement and the level of support they are required to provide to their successor in the role of the predecessor. A succession plan focused on the transition in leadership inclusive of both the predecessor and successor intentional interactions creates the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue that may have a positive impact and ensure successor success. Preparing for principal succession will move from a reactionary mode and into a purposeful planning event that is a positive experience for the entire organization.

Through a qualitative approach, the researcher examined the impact of principal succession through the perspective of leaders in distinct stages of their own leadership evolution. The data showed an attempt to appoint the best and brightest leaders to principal vacancies within the recruitment and selection process for succession. This
study also identified the existence of limited research in the area of principal succession planning that included predecessor engagement as part of the experience. Viewing principal succession as a formative model focused on a continuous leadership development will ensure that a cycle of success for current and new principals, as they assume leadership roles and responsibilities, will sustain a robust lifecycle for this complex role.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Superintendent or Central Office Administrators

Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This interview should only take about 60 minutes of your time. The purpose of this interview was to better understand the principal succession experience and decision-making process used for principal reassignments. Please give your honest answers in response to the questions asked.

This interview was for a research study. Your participation in this study was completely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential, meaning that no one will be able to connect your answers with your identify. You have the option to opt out of the study at any point in time.

If you have questions about the study, you can contact Olivia Amador-Valerio at 619-917-9556 or olivia.valerio@cvesd.org. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at San Diego State University, at 619-594-6222 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

Interview Questions:

1. Describe the criteria you use when selecting to appoint or replace school principals?

2. What succession plan was in place to support newly assigned or appointed school principals?

3. How do you develop potential candidates for leadership positions?

4. What your approach for succession planning?
APPENDIX B

Principal Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This interview should only take about 60 minutes of your time. The purpose of this interview was to better understand the principal succession experience and decision-making process used for principal reassignments. Please give your honest answers in response to the questions asked.

This interview was for a research study. Your participation in this study was completely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential, meaning that no one will be able to connect your answers with your identity. You have the option to opt out of the study at any point in time.

If you have questions about the study, you can contact Olivia Amador-Valerio at 619-917-9556 or olivia.valerio@cvesd.org. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at San Diego State University, at 619-594-6222 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

Interview question: Principals

1. Describe your personal principal placement or reassignment experience.

2. How have you learned from your succession experience and what recommendations would you provide central office leaders?
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. This interview was for a research study. Your participation in this study was completely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential, meaning that no one will be able to connect your answers with your identity. This interview should take no more than 60 minutes of your time. The purpose of this interview was to better understand the principal succession experience. Please give your honest answers in response to the questions asked. You have the option to opt out of the study at any point in time. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me, Olivia Amador-Valerio, at 619-917-9556 or olivia.valerio@cvesd.org. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at San Diego State University, at 619-594-6222 or irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Olivia Amador-Valerio from San Diego State University. I understand that the project was designed to gather information about academic work focused on Principal Succession. I will be one of approximately 9 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project was voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.

2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

3. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I refuse to be audio recorded, I will not be able to participate in the study.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

5. Faculty and administrators from my place of employment will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Educational Leadership at the San Diego State University.

7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

________________________________________________________________________
Interviewee Date

________________________________________________________________________
Olivia Amador-Valerio, Researcher Date