

I HAVE A VOICE SO LISTEN: PRINCIPAL PERCEPTION OF THE TEXAS
ACCOUNTABILITY INTERVENTION SYSTEM (TAIS)

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
Background	3
Texas Specific Background of State Accountability	3
Texas' Current Reform Model	10
Problem Statement	11
Purpose of Study	12
Research Questions	13
Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework	13
Significance of the Study	14
Definition of Key Terms	14
Organization of the Study	16
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	17
History of School Reform	17
Factors Contributing to Low Performing Schools	21
How Principals Responded in the Face of Mandated Reforms	24
Theoretical Framework	26
Chapter Summary	29
III. METHODOLOGY	31
Qualitative Research Design	31
Phenomenology	34
Site and Participant Selection	37
Data Collection Procedures	38
Data Analysis	41
Validation and Evaluation Measures	42
Limitations	43
Chapter Summary	44

IV. FINDINGS.....	45
Participant Profiles.....	45
Shelly	47
Bonnie.....	47
Diana.....	48
Paula.....	49
Susie.....	50
Interviews.....	50
Current State vs. Desired State	52
Changes in Programs and Processes.....	53
Changes in Demographics	56
Building Trust With Staff	60
Principal Sets the Tone	63
Principal Knowledge of TAIS	64
Principal Tasks.....	66
Principal Messaging.....	68
Inclusivity	70
Accountability For All	71
Merging With District Processes	74
Internal and External Supports.....	77
Reflection On the TAIS Process	79
Timeline and Structure.....	80
Advice to the Next IR Cohort.....	82
Building Principal Capacity.....	83
Principal Recommendations	85
Chapter Summary	88
V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS	90
Summary of the Study	90
Discussion of Key Findings.....	91
Finding One: The Absence of Principal Feedback at the State Level	92
Finding Two: Principal Recommendations to Improve the TAIS Process	93
Implications.....	96
Implications for Research	96
Implications for Policy.....	97
Recommendations for Future Research.....	99
Summary.....	100

APPENDIX.....	110
REFERENCES	113

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. History of state assessments in Texas.	102
2. Addition to history of state assessments in Texas.	103
3. DCSI job description.....	104
4. PSP job description.	106
5. 2017-2018 1 st year IR intervention calendar.....	108
6. Combined theoretical framework of DLS with state-level application.	109

ABSTRACT

Across the United States, individual states have taken the mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which originated in 2001 as part of the Reformation Era (Foley & Nelson, 2011), and created improvement structures to support schools in need of improvement. The concern with this process is in the description of how the school improvement structures are developed and presented to schools. The clear message is that principals are to implement these structures regardless of how they feel about their worth. Miller-Williams and Kritsonis (2009) challenged this when they reported, “Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization’s overall purpose” (p. 2).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of principals participating in one such school improvement structure mandated in Texas, the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). Included in this description of their experiences with the phenomena of TAIS, is their perception of how their feedback is used to inform this system at the State level. This study focused on answering the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of principals connected by, and participating in, the phenomenon of the TAIS process? How do these principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity?

This research applied the theoretical framework of Distributed Leadership Studies (DLS). The DLS framework posits that, “Leadership activity is constituted – defined or constructed – in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004, p. 10). The key aspect of the framework is in the interaction of leaders and followers within their situation. While Spillane’s work applied the DLS framework to schools specifically, with the principal as the leader and teachers as followers, I argue that this same framework applies to the State level of education. The connection in this research study is made between the DLS framework and the Texas Education Agency as the leader and school leaders as the followers. The DLS perspective shifts the unit of analysis from the individual to a web of leaders, followers, and the situation (Spillane et al., 2004), and the State has the opportunity to use the web of leaders in schools to its advantage.

Rather than simply allow state and federal governments to continue to impose their school reform ideas on school districts and schools, this research included interviews with five principals of schools in central and south Texas who completed the TAIS process within the last two years. This provided the opportunity to hear from a group of principals who have lived experiences with the same phenomena, the TAIS process, while in the same role, school Principal. It also provided insight into their perception of how their feedback on the TAIS process, once completed, is used at the State level to further inform the process in the future.

The key findings from this research study, in connection to the research questions were: (1) There is an absence of Principal feedback at the State level in regards to the TAIS process and its implementation and (2) Principals have strong and viable recommendations to offer the State that will serve to improve the TAIS process.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

I entered teaching later in life after spending a few years in the business world. Unlike most people who enter this career, I did not espouse from a young age to be a teacher, even though my mother taught for 42 years before retiring. I set out on a journey to change the fashion industry by becoming a buyer for a major department store. I had visions of traveling the world in search of the newest and hottest trends. After my first course in fashion merchandising, Textiles, I decided it was not for me. I spent a semester memorizing the names of over 100 swatches of material that I had to identify by sight and touch on an exam to pass the class, and did not return to college for a second year. Instead, I began working in a retail clothing store, where I quickly rose to manager. Despite my success, I did not see this as a long-term career, but more of a job. After two years, I went to work for a payroll processing company. I quickly rose through the ranks there and found my niche in the business world. The structure to the work, the fast pace, and the sense of accomplishment I left with each day were all attributes of this new career I loved.

After a few years, I relocated to San Antonio and decided to return to college for my degree and made the decision to enter teaching. Based on my experience as a student in college and a student in the business world, I knew I could teach others in a way that would result in their developing a love for learning. My college experience ushered me away from school, but my work experience created a love for my job. My goal was to use lessons learned from both experiences as I entered the teaching profession.

After graduating, I began teaching elementary school at age 27, and quickly began to rise as a model teacher. Campus staff from other schools was coming to visit

my classroom and I was videotaped by the curriculum department so other teachers had the opportunity to view my practices in action. What should have been an exciting time for me turned out to be one of great stress. My teaching team was resentful and vindictive when it came to my success and was not open to any type of new learning. I transferred to another school and joined an amazing team who worked collaboratively. I also had the experience of working for two very different leaders at these campuses, one who was completely uninvolved in the instruction taking place in the building, and one who was connected to every classroom. I saw the potential to impact an entire campus as a principal and I knew right away that staying in the classroom was too limiting. I saw campus administration as a way to marry my love for the business world with the field of education.

Once becoming a building assistant principal, and then principal, I saw the impact strong leadership had on an entire school community, from the families to the teachers and ultimately, the students. My experience has always been with campuses that were struggling academically and I was able to turn them around quickly. This led me to the next step in my career, which was moving to central office to support principals with all campus operations, including curriculum and instruction. After a couple of years in this role, our district had two schools labeled “Improvement Required” under the Texas Education Agency’s state accountability system. With this rating came a host of state-mandated interventions, which I was directly involved in as the District Coordinator for School Improvement (DCSI). It was through this experience that I began to ask questions about how the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) came to be and who was making these decisions about the processes, templates, and structures that campuses, and

campus principals, were being forced to implement. As the school year drew to a close, and the mandated TAIS process was also coming to an end, I found myself asking the campus principal about her experience with the process. She had amazing insight and ideas for improving not only the process, but the supports that come with its implementation. The more she talked, the more I was intrigued not only with what she had to say, but with why the State of Texas was not asking principals for this valuable input that could serve to improve the TAIS process across Texas schools. Through my research, I once again find myself looking for ways to impact a larger audience of learners at the State level by sharing principal's perceptions of the TAIS process.

Background

Texas Specific Background of State Accountability

Understanding the history of school reform in the State of Texas requires an understanding of the accountability system in Texas. In 2001, as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted at the federal level, Rios (2013) reported how, “states have developed accountability systems that provide various sanctions intended to place schools on a fast track to improve students’ achievement as measured by test scores” (p. 24). Before this push from NCLB in 2001, Texas had been pioneering attempts at school reform for decades that involved pushing the boundaries of what other states were doing in their schools, including being the first to focus on the achievement of each student and not just aggregate groups of data (Nelson, McGhee, Meno, & Slater, 2007).

Another example of reform in Texas that was not yet seen in other states involved the development of a statewide curriculum. The State had traditionally forced local school districts to create their own curriculum in the absence of a statewide curriculum.

This meant an over-reliance on textbooks and a level of instruction that was not at the level students deserved. In an attempt to provide a curriculum to schools across Texas, a comprehensive set of standards, called the Essential Elements (EE's), was created and implemented in 1984 by the State Board of Education (SBOE) (Nelson et al., 2007). The Essential Elements remained in place for over a decade until the SBOE adopted the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in 1997. "The TEKS were developed to be more specific and focused than the Essential Elements, with emphasis placed on the knowledge and skills students were expected to learn rather than on the delivery standards expected of teachers" (Technical Digest, 2008, p. 9).

Texas was making an effort to support schools by providing EE's and TEKS, but what soon emerged was the beginning of the state assessment system. The State saw a need to determine the level of student mastery of the state curriculum, which led to the creation of the first state-wide assessments being administered in the mid-1980's. The testing system has undergone many changes over time, including content and name changes. As reported by the Texas Education Agency (2016), the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) was administered from 1980-1985, and then became the Texas Education Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) from 1986-1989 (Figure 1). As the 1990's began, a new era of education reform took hold in Texas, led by the Commissioner of Education (Nelson et al., 2007). This reform was marked with new steps being taken in the state assessment arena intended to raise the bar, as previous tests did just as their names inferred, assessed only minimum or basic skills (Cruse & Twing, 2000). As part of the reform movement, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) became the new state assessment. TAAS was the first criterion-referenced test

used, as all others were norm-referenced. This assessment was also the first to be developed under guidance from the Texas Education Agency, as opposed to an external agency, in order to align with the state curriculum at the time, the Essential Elements. This was not the last change Texas would see in its state assessment. According to Nelson et al. (2007), “the Texas legislature or state board of education has altered the testing system nearly every year since 1990” (p. 706). And with the birth of an assessment system what would undoubtedly follow was an accountability reporting process.

The public reporting system in Texas originated during the time of TABS testing. Reports based on TABS results, however, went only to the school districts and schools, not the general public. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) was a revised form of public reporting requiring mandatory public meetings and a system of reporting educational data for Texas schools and districts to all stakeholders. The AEIS reporting system was the first to disaggregate testing data into sub-groups (i.e., by grade, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status), which began to shed light on the inequities among these groups (Nelson et al., 2007). Texas is known as the trailblazer in the state assessment and accountability forum, and the AEIS unveiling of inequities served to add fuel to that fire. According to Achieve, Inc. (2002), due to the information revealed, there were many new pieces of legislation put into practice including: a mandated cap on the ratio of teachers to students through grade four of 1:22, full-day kindergarten, and half-day pre-kindergarten for students who are English Language Learners or are identified as low socioeconomic status. A focus on providing professional development to improve teacher quality was a new approach for legislators in regards to improving

schools (Achieve, Inc., 2002). The Texas Commissioner of Education in the early 1990's raised the number of contract days for teachers to provide time for targeted professional development. The intended outcome for this professional development was that it would build the capacity of teachers because the training would not be the traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach, but would be specific to the needs of each individual campus (Nelson et al., 2007). While there were many intended outcomes that served to strengthen the education students were receiving in Texas schools, there were also unintended outcomes that did not have the same positive effect.

As the history in Texas shows, things do not remain the same for long, and the revision of the EEs to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) was another example of change in the Texas public school system. There were testing implications that followed this curriculum change as well. The TEKS were integrated into the existing state assessment, TAAS, from 1999-2000. However, as a result of the 76th Legislation, the development of a new state assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the State assessment from 2003-2011, began with the intent that "attention was focused on ensuring a strong, direct, and effective link between the TEKS curriculum and the statewide assessments" (Technical Digest, 2008, p. 10) and so marked the turning point that Nelson and McGhee (2004) noted as the time when "measuring what has been learned has become as important as teaching itself" (p. 706). Despite the positive intent, an unintended outcome was seen across Texas. A narrowing of the curriculum began to take shape in school districts across the state, which created concern that the test was driving instruction. There was evidence of moving away from what was considered "enrichment" curriculum that included fine arts, technology courses, and other

electives as time once dedicated to these courses was being spent on tested subjects. Furthermore, students that were not performing well on assessments were being placed in classes intended to provide remediation for skills students were weak in, based on their test data (McNeil, 2000). There was another change in the state assessment system yet to come. In 2011-2012, as a result of House Bill HB 3 in 2009, the Texas Education Agency began the implementation of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) as a replacement to the TAKS tests (Figure 2). According to the TEA, the STAAR assessments were quite different from the TAKS tests previously administered due to the need to meet legislative requirements. STAAR differed in the following ways: increased level of rigor, course-specific content was tested on high school End-of-Course assessments, and the reading and math assessments were linked from grade to grade, as well as to postsecondary readiness targets (Texas Education Agency, 2010).

At the onset of the development of the accountability system in Texas, and to avoid remediation based on student performance on one test on one given day, there was credibility given to the idea that students should have the opportunity to be assessed with performance-based measures rather than simply a multiple-choice test (Nelson et al., 2007). The State went as far as conducting field tests of performance-based measures. These field tests were quickly abandoned as it was deemed too hard to administer performance-based assessments to such a large group of students state-wide and that they were too costly. Once the movement of the multiple-choice assessment took hold, the expansion of state testing soon followed. As with any assessment, data was generated, and in large amounts. As more data became available to schools and districts, students

began to be seen as numbers associated with tests rather than as individuals. They were viewed with a very narrow lens, and schools and school districts were soon viewed with the same narrow lens.

Just as Texas saw a need to measure the progress of students in learning the EEs and the TEKS by creating the state assessment system, the State now saw a need to measure the progress of schools and school districts in raising student scores on those very assessments. In 1994, a rating scale for state assessments was created and became a part of AEIS reporting. Schools earned one of four ratings based on student performance on state tests from the lowest, Unsatisfactory, which carried with it sanctions from the State, to the highest rating of Exemplary. As ratings were reported to all stakeholders and made public, it was reported that, “Principals and teachers who work in “recognized” and “exemplary” schools are typically viewed as being highly competent; those who work in “low-performing” schools are often seen as ineffective and are blamed for the schools’ low ratings” (Nelson et al., 2007, p. 706). The implication of this assumption is that educators do not want to work in lower-rated schools, which are typically made up of large numbers of low-income and minority students that need the help of educators the most (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Principals and other stakeholders in schools began to feel the stigma of the new rating system and soon learned to look for loopholes in the accountability system, which included ways to move students to barely passing state assessments with intensive remediation, and the birth of the term “bubble kids”.

“Comprehensive reform in Texas rested on four critical components: 1) declaring what should be learned (curriculum), 2) measuring what is learned (assessment), 3) creating a system of public reporting and accountability, and 4) doing what is necessary

to improve student learning” (Nelson et al., 2007, p. 702). The advent of “bubble kids” is evidence of the fourth component in action. These students were identified as being on the verge of passing the state assessment and were, therefore, provided intense intervention. Not only were “bubble kids” subjected to a narrowing of their curriculum, students that were seen as too far away from the passing standard, some would argue, were left out completely of any effort by schools to raise their achievement scores. Students who were performing well were the only ones who, in some places, received enriched curriculum (Nelson et al., 2007).

Texas provided a look into reform and a platform to modify future reform models based on lessons learned from their attempts. The unintended outcome when schools received failing ratings in Texas’ accountability system, was the belief held by educators and policy makers, that people must have failed, and not the system. The strong recommendation was to do just the opposite and focus on improving the system, not the people within the system. The result of reform efforts in Texas was stated by Nelson et al. (2007), as follows:

In spite of 15 years of accountability and improvement by individual students, teachers, and schools, the systemic inequities and the problems that led to the initial reform (e.g., inadequate and inequitable funding, low achievement, low teacher quality, dropouts, low college entrance rates) remain. (p. 709)

To begin the work of improving the system, educators must be encouraged to take a seat at the policy-making table. However, currently in Texas, and one would argue in most other states, policy is written without the benefit of those most affected by it.

Texas' Current Reform Model

Schools in Texas today are directly affected by one such policy that dictates the school improvement model to be used when schools do not perform at the level of “Met Standard”, according to the current accountability system. As of 2012-2013, the State moved from AEIS reporting to utilizing the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). With this move to TAPR came the renaming of state testing performance categories to “Met Standard” and “Improvement Required”. Schools who receive the “Improvement Required” (IR) rating enter into the state-mandated reform model which utilizes the framework named the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). According to the Texas Center for District & School Support, the Texas Education Agency, and Region 13 Education Service Center (n.d.), the TAIS framework “is designed to establish the foundational systems, actions, and processes to support the continuous improvement of Texas school districts and campuses” (p. 1). This framework provided to schools is based on the continuous improvement process of “data analysis, needs assessment, targeted planning, implementation, and monitoring that leads to improved student outcomes” (TAIS framework, n.d., p. 2).

The TAIS process, which all IR schools must follow, consists of required key players. These key players include the campus principal, a Campus Leadership Team (CLT) identified by the campus principal made up of campus administrators, counselors, and grade level or content teachers representing the staff, a District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI), and a Professional Service Provider (PSP). The TEA provides IR schools with a job description for the DCSI (Figure 3) and the PSP (Figure 4) that

delineates the requisite skills for each position and the responsibilities of each role in regards to the TAIS process. The superintendent of the school district with the IR campus must review these job descriptions and appoint a DCSI and hire a PSP. The TEA also provides a list of PSP's that school districts are allowed to choose from as they must have applied and been approved by the TEA prior to being placed on the list given to school districts.

The timeline for the entire year of TAIS is prescribed by the TEA (Figure 5) and includes trainings, preparation of a Targeted Improvement Plan (TIP), school board approval of the TIP, required conference calls with the TEA, and several ongoing progress report submissions to the TEA throughout the school year. This process in Texas is evidence of the continued control of school operations by our government without the involvement or input of our school and district leaders, even though it is the principal who is responsible for leading the implementation of the TAIS process on the campus. At the time this study was conducted, the spring of 2018, the aforementioned process was in place. At the conclusion of this study, the 2018-2019 academic year, the TEA was in the process of making adjustments to the TAIS process. While the term TAIS may not be used in the future, it will undoubtedly continue to be a process that the principal is responsible for implementing. It is for this reason my research study focused on the principal's perspective of the school improvement process in Texas.

Problem Statement

The history of government involvement in school improvement efforts is long and arduous. Across the United States, individual states have taken the mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which originated in 2001 as part of the Reformation Era

(Foley & Nelson, 2011), and created improvement structures to support schools in need of improvement. The concern with this process is in the description of how the school improvement structures are developed and presented to schools. The clear message is that principals are to implement these structures regardless of how they feel about their worth. Miller-Williams and Kritsonis (2009) challenged this when they reported, “Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization’s overall purpose” (p. 2). This view posits that principals should still take responsibility for pushing back on school reform models and not simply implement what is given to them. Better yet, the State would benefit from involving the most important player in successful school improvement, the principal, when state officials are developing what the model for improvement should be. The alternative, which does nothing to move schools toward improvement, according to Marks and Nance (2007) is, “Either federal or state influences would frustrate the ability of schools to address local priorities, or higher authorities would dictate courses of action with which local agencies, including districts and schools, would simply comply” (p. 6).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of principals participating in the TAIS process, to include their perception of how their feedback is used to inform the process at the State level. Rather than simply allow state and federal governments to continue to impose their school reform ideas on school districts and schools, the intent of this research was to conduct interviews of five to seven principals of schools in the central and south Texas area who have completed the TAIS

process within the last two years. This provided the opportunity to hear from a group of principals who have lived experiences with the same phenomena, the TAIS process, while in the same role, school Principal. It also provided insight into their perception of how their feedback on the TAIS process, once completed, is used at the State level to further inform the process in the future. Good and McCaslin (2008) determined that school reform initiatives can profit from more research on participant perceptions, and this proposed research will serve to add to the body of literature on that topic.

Research Questions

The following research questions were the focus of this research study: What are the lived experiences of principals connected by, and participating in, the phenomenon of the TAIS process? How do these principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity?

Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework

Distributed Leadership Studies (DLS) provided the theoretical framework for the research study. The DLS framework posits that, “Leadership activity is constituted – defined or constructed – in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10). The key aspect of the framework is in the interaction of leaders and followers within their situation. While Spillane’s work applied the DLS framework to schools specifically, with the principal as the leader and teachers as followers, I argue that this same framework applies to the State level of education. The connection in the research study was made between the DLS framework at the school level and my application of the framework to the State level. In

my application, the TEA is the leader and school leaders are the followers. The combination of Spillane's framework (Spillane et al., 2004), aimed at the campus level, and my theory of applying this framework at the State level, is depicted in the image below (Figure 6). The DLS perspective shifts the unit of analysis from the individual to a web of leaders, followers, and the situation (Spillane et al., 2004), and the State has the opportunity to use the web of leaders in schools to its advantage.

Significance of the Study

This research study contributed to scholarship in the following ways: (1) Shed light on principal perceptions of the TAIS process, which has not been done previously on this topic of study, specifically; (2) Inform policymakers at the State level with ideas about eliciting principal perceptions in the future; and (3) Provide a voice to principals in regards to their participation in the TAIS process. Through this study, practitioners had the opportunity to tell their story by sharing their lived experience with the TAIS process to fellow practitioners, which served to provide others a new insight to their own journey through the process. Contributions were made to the literature on this research topic by specifically reporting findings from elementary principals, which had not been previously reported. In conclusion, through the connection to the DLS theoretical framework, policymakers at the State level will have an additional avenue in which to view the possibility of a new approach to developing school reform models.

Definition of Key Terms

To develop a contextual understanding, the following is a list of key terms used in the remaining chapters, along with an operational definition of these terms.

1. *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*: “Adequate yearly progress as defined by a State describes the amount of yearly improvement each Title I school and district is expected to make in order to enable low-achieving children to meet high performance levels expected of all children” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).
2. *Bubble-kids*: Term meant to describe students who are on the cusp of not meeting the passing standard of a state assessment (Foley & Nelson, 2011).
3. *Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models*: Federally or State-mandated models intended to increase student outcomes on federal or state assessments by increasing expectations for performance (Foley & Nelson, 2011).
4. *Deficit mindset*: The notion that students fail in school because they come from a background that includes experiences that are perceived to obstruct the learning process.
5. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*: “The No Child Left Behind Act authorizes several federal education programs that are administered by the states. The law is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Under the 2002 law, states are required to test students in reading and math in grades 3–8 and once in high school” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).
6. *Texas Education Agency (TEA)*: “The Texas Education Agency is the state agency that oversees primary and secondary public education. It is headed by the commissioner of education” (tea.texas.gov).

Organization of the Study

Chapter One of this dissertation begins with my personal experience as an introduction to the study. The context of chapter one begins by providing background into the state accountability system in Texas to provide the reader needed schema for the remainder of the proposal. This is followed by sections that include Texas' current reform model, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. At the conclusion of these sections, the research questions are provided followed by a brief overview of the theoretical framework, definitions of key terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter Two provides the literature review and the theoretical framework of the dissertation study. The sections of this chapter include a review of the method followed by emerging themes as sections. These include the history of school reform, factors contributing to low performing schools, and how principals responded in the face of mandated reforms. The conclusion of Chapter Two consists of a discussion of the theoretical framework and a chapter summary. Chapter Three includes a description of the methodology. Specifically, the sections of this chapter are: qualitative research design, phenomenology, site and participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, validation and evaluation measures, and limitations. Chapter Four includes a presentation of the findings, including a description of each participant and their education experiences. Finally, Chapter Five provides discussion of key findings and implications for research and policy along with recommendations for future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

“Because the government was the dominant player in the education enterprise, reformers expected the state to develop and administer appropriate remedies” (Murphy & Datnow, 2003, p. 5). Holding true to meeting this expectation, the history of government involvement in school improvement efforts is long and arduous. While there is ample research that shows the government has been quick to pass down educational reform models that were intent on improving student outcomes in schools, there is little research that indicates the most important player in successful school improvement, the principal, is ever considered when state officials are determining what the model should be.

In preparation for conducting a study to explore the principal perception of the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) with the intent to inform policymakers as revisions to the process continue, a review of relevant literature was conducted that revealed three main themes. The first theme will aid in understanding the historical context of TAIS, which is born out of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models originating from mandates at the federal level. The second theme centers around what the research attributes as factors contributing to low-performing schools, including schools that do not succeed, even when implementing various reform models. The review of the literature concludes with how principals have responded when faced with mandated interventions.

History of School Reform

Dating back to the 1950s, there were perceptions that something was wrong with the education system. These perceptions were strong across the United States and made their way into the office of the President in the 1960s under Lyndon B. Johnson, who was

a former Texas teacher. During his time in office, he came to be known as “The Education President” by passing more than sixty education bills. Texas regained its stronghold in The White House decades later when George W. Bush became President and continued to press for improvements in education (Preuss, 2009).

The presence of government in education, according to Murphy and Datnow (2003), is defined by three eras that centered around school reform. During the Intensification Era, 1980-1987, the government was the driving force behind education and, therefore, was expected to answer the question, “What was wrong with education?” The next years, 1986-1995, brought on the Restructuring Era. During this time span, the theme was too much reliance on government as the reform engine. Although the government was initially responding to the outcry of the people to provide answers, there was a shift when the responses were not having the desired impact because root causes were not being addressed. Finally, the third era, the Reformation Era, 1992-2003, brought accountability to the forefront. It is this accountability that still guides the school improvement mandates present today.

During the Reformation Era, the federal government gave birth to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. According to Foley and Nelson (2011), while NCLB and other incentivized CSR models like Race to the Top, intended to increase student outcomes on state-mandated assessments by increasing expectations for performance, they also “placed sanctions against schools that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), including financial and human capital consequences” (p. 29). When states and school districts saw the sanctions they would be subject to, it caused states to “play the game,

investing resources in “bubble kids” to make the grade, leaving low-performing students out” (Foley & Nelson, 2011, p. 30).

This federal-level problem was perpetuated at the state level as Rios (2013) reported, “mandated by NCLB, states have developed accountability systems that provide various sanctions intended to place schools on a fast track to improve students’ achievement as measured by test scores” (p. 24). It is not clear why states would travel down this path when research does not support externally-mandated reforms and shows that reforms are most effective when they are created by those that need to take ownership of it the most, the stakeholders (Cohen, 2001).

Texas was no exception to the rule when it came to government agencies creating mandates for schools aimed at reforming them. According to Cuban (2008) in a report prepared by Stanford University and the Austin Independent School District in Austin, Texas, legislators have been making assumptions about schools dating back to House Bill 72 in 1984. This bill became law under Ross Perot, who was appointed to head the Select Committee on Public Education. Based on Perot’s recommendations, which were based on assumptions and the passing of House Bill 72, there was a shift in the state’s education governing agency, the Texas Education Agency, and its’ leader, the Commissioner of Education. Legislators and politicians, “thoroughly transformed the role of the Commissioner of Education and Texas Education Agency (TEA) from a hands-off agency to an iron-fisted managerially-driven, bureaucratic arm of reform-minded governors and legislatures” (p. 33).

As the Texas Education Agency gained strength with this shift, the effects of their mandates took a toll on campus principals. When more than one policy is created at the

same time, and there is not a system that provides checks and balances across policies, it can lead to a lack of coherence between policies that affects principals' influence on what happens in the building (Marks & Nance, 2007). Not only were there multiple policies coming down, NCLB's forced accountability system included the monitoring of data in its second layer, which had even more implications for principals. Although the intent of this added component to the mandates was to ensure compliance across the board for schools, what began to happen is that it led to each person interpreting what it meant to be in compliance with NCLB's mandates and making decisions on their campuses accordingly (Koyoma, 2014).

As principals across the country attempted to learn to navigate the mandates coming down from the federal and state level, they were forced to do this most times without a support system. According to Good (2008), the Arizona Comprehensive Reform Model is an example that dictates processes for principals without much support from the state level. He went on to report that even at the district level, supports vary from district to district. Meddaugh (2014) conducted research on principals and their capacity to lead across states and reported that, in some states, principals of failing schools were mandated to participate in the Midwest Coaching Institute "or else" (p. 148). What is not surprising is that when faced with leading schools that are not meeting federal and state standards, many principals started to leave the profession.

According to Foley and Nelson (2011) who implemented Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene model as a part of their research in this area, it is possible NCLB's Adequate Yearly Progress served as a distractor for qualified middle school principal candidates and caused principals to leave the profession. NCLB created sanctions that caused a

situation where schools that have the highest need are also the hardest to staff with experienced principals (Young, Reimer, & Young, 2010). This view was also supported by Reyes and Garcia (2014) who reported that NCLB did not consider the effects of its mandates on schools with high-poverty and high levels of English-Language Learners (ELLs) and created a system that made it almost impossible for schools with those demographics to meet standard.

What does seem to be evident is that legislators realize the current reform models have not produced the results of which they hoped. According to Good and McCaslin (2008):

The continuing debate on the reauthorization of federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) shows that the majority of members of Congress hold deep beliefs that our schools need to improve. However, there is no consensus on how this can be done and whether NCLB has had any discernable effect on improving the achievement problem. (p. 2476)

Gross, Booker, and Goldhaber (2009) also reported that, even in Texas, studies show that students have not made significant gains in schools that were implementing mandated CSR models. Perhaps what deserves more attention is the in-between that Good (2008) spoke about, and not just the inputs and outcomes.

Factors Contributing to Low Performing Schools

The question has been asked over and over; why do some schools in some school districts perform lower than others? I would argue that not only does the answer depend on whom is asked, but also in what group those people fall. Policymakers tend to blame the school districts and the schools. So much so that some believe school districts should

not even be allowed to be in the equation when it comes to helping schools improve.

According to McLaughlin and Talbert (2003):

Districts' dismal track record in carrying out or sustaining school reform leads some policymakers and reformers to conclude that while the district is part of the reform problem it should not be part of the solution. Major school reform initiatives such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Annenberg Challenge, 7 and Goals 2000 cut districts out of the action in the view that central office incompetence was incurable and that school reforms were bound to fail at the district door. (p. 5)

School districts look to find the cause at the school level. When this begins to happen, the first person that carries the blame is the principal. As the leader of the school, the principal is ultimately responsible for all of the good that happens in the building, and all of the bad. How this blame is leveled, however, differs. Meddaugh (2014), for example, reported that while the principal was the leader in the school that was responsible for the performance of the students, he posited that principals in low-performing schools did not have the capacity to lead those schools to higher levels of achievement. The principals he studied were part of a reform model that looked to assign principal coaches to assist in building the capacity of principals in buildings where it was determined they must not have the capacity to lead instructionally, based on the performance of the students. The problem with this model was that the principals the coaches were there to support saw themselves as managers, not as instructional leaders, and were, therefore, resistant to the principal coach assigned. Still, others reported that principals in middle schools where low performance is occurring should be offered

signing bonuses and additional supports (Young et al., 2010). Prinity's (2010) research also found a connection between the role of the school principal as the leader of the school improvement model and the performance of the teachers and the students. In connection to the previously mentioned findings, Prinity found that "Principals are more likely to support instructional directions when they have knowledge about the initiatives or have had the opportunity to learn about them" (p. 81).

School-level perspectives on why some schools achieve lower performance than others differ from policymakers and school districts. Nelson and Guerra (2014) reported that the school-level perspective stems from the fact that teachers come with a deficit mindset, which interferes with principals' attempts at school improvement. Deficit mindset is an area that needs to be addressed when creating models for school reform and, according to their research, it has not been. Keeping teachers as the focus of why some schools do not perform as others do, Murphy and Datnow (2003) attribute this to the need for building the capacity of teachers in classrooms. This perspective shifts the responsibility to a layer underneath the principal and places it with the group of people who have the most direct and consistent contact with students.

The answer to the question originally posed comes full circle as some shift the blame back to the policymakers who created the CSR models that schools are forced to implement. Due to these CSRs, principals are operating with higher levels of stress than ever before. According to Foley and Nelson (2011), there is a lack of qualified principal candidates. This lack of qualified candidates is, in part, due to teachers seeing the stress of their principal as a distractor for entering the principalship. Once the AYP designation is assigned to a school, this further serves as a barrier to attracting qualified principal

candidates to the schools who are in the greatest need, and for negatively impacting the job satisfaction of the principals who are already leading those schools. This unsettling impact leads to the final theme of this review of the literature.

How Principals Responded in the Face of Mandated Reforms

Regardless of the CSR model that principals are faced with implementing, how principals respond to those reforms has been the subject of research that has yielded interesting results. CSRs are mandated, which implies that principals are to put them in place regardless of how they feel about their worth. Miller-Williams and Kritsonis (2009) challenged this when they reported, “Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization’s overall purpose” (p. 2). This view posits that principals should still take responsibility for pushing back on CSR models and not simply implement what is given to them. This idea is supported by Koyama (2014) who reported principals who internalize the federal and state mandates find a way to make it applicable to their schools, and those who do not, see no improvement in the instruction taking place in their buildings as a result of the mandates. This result implies that it does come back to the capacity of the principals to lead the reform effort. Not all principals have the expertise required to know how to “operate in the realm of unknown circumstances massive complexities. Today’s leader has to employ a different way of thinking about their organizations and ways to handle the challenges they face” (Miller-Williams & Kritsonis, 2009, p. 2).

Despite knowing that principals need to have the capacity to make these types of decisions, there has been little research on what type of leadership is important and why

(Murphy & Datnow, 2003). There is evidence that shows there is a need to focus on the culture of the school as a starting point for the turnaround of schools. This work includes bringing teachers in as part of the team (Meddaugh, 2014; Reyes & Garcia, 2014). Additional research supports this claim, that says, “Strong leadership relationships among principals and teachers both enable and result from shared work” and “Broad-based collaboration practiced by the principal, teachers, and others engaged in school improvement benefits from and contributes to a school’s academic capacity” (Prinity, 2010, p. 81). What is also apparent is that, when faced with mandates of CSR models, if principals are not prepared or supported appropriately, they will often make decisions that have further repercussions. As Koyama (2014) found, reports have been filed accusing school leaders of cheating on assessments when they are faced with sanctions if the standard is not met. The reason principals may resort to these practices is perhaps best explained in the words of the principals themselves. Good and McCaslin (2008) reported:

Principals believed that policy makers did not understand the conditions of schooling and poverty and that they expected too much change too soon. Most principals felt that standardized measures used to evaluate school progress were inadequate at best, and some felt that these measures were used without merit or justification. (p. 2483)

The effects of top-down mandates have been felt across the United States over the past decades. There seems to be a disconnect in the way the mandates come down and the intent behind them. I would argue that it is somewhat of an oxymoron that top-down mandates look to implement bottom-up reform. As Marks and Nance (2007) stated,

“Either federal or state influences would frustrate the ability of schools to address local priorities, or higher authorities would dictate courses of action with which local agencies, including districts and schools, would simply comply” (p. 6).

Theoretical Framework

As previously noted in Chapter One, the theoretical framework for this study is Distributed Leadership Studies (DLS). Harris (2007) described Spillane’s DLS framework as having taken the “distributed cognition perspective and superimposed it upon leadership practice in school” (p. 317). This is due to the fusion of cognition with the ability to act in certain situations. Harris (2007) explained:

In order to think and act, therefore, we draw upon a set of cultural and social norms to guide us. Consequently, distributed cognition reinforces the importance of context in thinking and acting: Cognition is distributed in the material and social situation. (p. 316)

James Spillane’s research and development of DLS is based on two core aspects: principal plus and practice. Principal plus is described as multiple people leading and managing schools, and practice refers to the practice of leading and managing as it emerges from interactions among school leaders and followers (Distributed Leadership, 2010). According to Spillane (2009), “Too often, we place the burden for saving a failing school on the principal, perpetuating a view of successful school leaders as heroes and less successful ones as failures” (p. 70). This idea is illustrated again and again in schools who struggle to meet the academic standards set by State and Federal governments and are then forced to implement school improvement processes mandated by those same government agencies.

As has been previously noted, there is a history of evidence that shows the use of a top-down management approach used by government agencies when deciding what is best for schools and school improvement. The DLS is useful in contributing to further understanding the issue that comes with using a top-down management approach in policy-making at the State level because, as stated at distributedleadership.org (Distributed Leadership, 2010), it is a “framework for researchers and practitioners to use in diagnosing the practice of leading and managing and designing for improvement” and is “working to change how researchers, developers, practitioners, and policy-makers think about school leadership and management”. Additional research supports the use of this type of framework in schools. In research conducted by Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, and Myers (2007), the term “networked leadership” was used to describe a DLS-like system in schools. According to Scribner et al. (2007):

Networked leadership emphasizes looking at what school personnel do, more than who is doing it, and it challenges the conventional belief that leadership is associated with particular positions. The message is that those seeking to study leadership should look for the performance of these key activities instead of assuming that watching the principal will explain how the school is managed. (p. 69)

State-level policymakers, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Commissioner of Education, and the Division of School Improvement specifically, I would argue, are prone to conduct business as usual. They do not pause to assess how their way of doing business impacts schools, school districts, and their leaders, as they attempt to implement these mandates. As stated by Spillane and Anderson (in press), “As policymakers

incorporate and press radically ‘new’ ideas, they produce uncertainty, puzzles, and ambiguity for those who are charged with implementing policy (micro level) in practice” (p.32). Further support of the use of DLS as a framework for this study is the conclusion by Spillane and Anderson (in press), “School leaders, we argue, have been left to manage in the middle between teachers and policymakers with different expectations and norms about what it means to be a professional educator” (p. 32).

In conclusion, the use of the DLS framework will add to the understanding of this topic, by helping to explain to policymakers the benefit of involving school and district leaders in policy decisions, opposed to using a top-down management approach. As stated by Spillane and Anderson (in press):

During unsettled times, when logics are in contestation, school leaders at the micro level may be left (by default) to do the ‘heavy lifting’ when it comes to giving others a sense of policy’s legitimacy and its meanings, and compelling others’ cooperation in putting those meanings into practice. This ‘heavy lifting’ is work that those making policy and supporting school leaders should take into account”. (p. 32)

As described previously in Chapter One, through this research study, I connected the DLS framework, which Spillane relates to campus-level leadership, to its use with State-level leadership. The three prongs of the DLS framework illustrate the situation, the leaders, and the followers. These prongs work interactively rather than in a linear fashion. In regards to campus-level leadership, the situation is campus operations, the leaders are the principals, and the followers are the teachers. At the school level, it is these three prongs that work together to implement the TAIS process on an IR campus.

In the same manner, these three prongs work interactively at the State level. However, in regards to State-level leadership, the situation is state policy, the leaders are our State leaders, the Commissioner of Education and the Division of School Improvement within the TEA, specifically, and the followers are school and school district leaders (Figure 6). At the State level, it is these three prongs that make the decisions that dictate how school principals will be forced to implement the TAIS process on IR campuses.

Chapter Summary

The main points found in the literature reviewed indicate that policymakers are the drivers of CSR models in place in schools today. Across the United States, individual states have taken the mandates from NCLB and created their own structures for schools to follow. These mandates are often not supported at the state and district level, which leaves principals to figure out how to navigate through them on their own. While some supports are provided, including principal coaches, they are provided as a mandate, which undermines the intent of the word “support”. The literature indicates levels of blame in the system that stem from the state to the school district, and from the principals to the teachers. More experienced and capable principals can find ways to make the CSRs work in their schools, but they are still not “owned” by the principal or the school. This process has produced limited results when it comes to raising student achievement in the very schools that are targeted with the CSR models.

Questions remain that seek to address why principals, the very people that are responsible for implementing the CSR model, following through on that implementation, and the results obtained from the implementation, are not a part of the process in creating the CSR model they are expected to use. Foley and Nelson (2011) found that more

research is needed in elementary and high schools to measure the impact of AYP on principals' satisfaction. Good and McCaslin (2008) determined that school reform initiatives can profit from more research on participant perceptions. Finally, Murphy and Datnow (2003) reported that there is little knowledge about what type of leadership is important in school reform. These conclusions served as the basis for my research study, which explored principals' perceptions of the Texas Accountability Intervention System in Texas with the intent to inform policy makers as revisions to the process continue.

III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative methodology design of the research study. Justification is given for the use of qualitative methods to answer the research questions. The chapter also describes the use of the phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of principals that participated in a school improvement structure mandated in Texas, the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). According to Van Manen (1990), “various thinkers have noted that lived experience first of all has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence” (p. 36). Phenomenology provides the backdrop for research participants to share their lived experiences in a reflective manner through qualitative interviews. This methodology chapter provides a description of the process for data collection and analysis that expands on the idea of reflection. Additional information is provided in this chapter that includes site and participant selection, data collection procedures, validation and evaluation measures, and limitations.

Qualitative Research Design

As a researcher, I had a choice to make between qualitative and quantitative research methods that must be purposeful in its intent, as these two research methods serve research studies in different ways. On one hand, “Qualitative research is concerned with the quality or nature of human experiences and what these phenomena mean to individuals” (Draper, 2004, p. 642). It is also said that in qualitative research, “meanings are seen as socially constructed rather than universal ‘givens’ and thus contingent on social context. Qualitative research thus aims to describe and explain social phenomena as they occur in their natural settings”. In quantitative research, on the other hand,

“Emphasis is placed on the need for objectivity and empirical or ‘hard’ data, i.e. those data that are directly observable and measurable via the sense” (Draper, 2004, p. 643). As I refined my research study and narrowed the intent to one that describes the lived experiences of principals that participated in a school improvement structure mandated in Texas, the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS), there was a clear justification for the choice to use qualitative research methodology. I was not interested in obtaining hard data, but in hearing from the participants their descriptions of the experiences with the TAIS process, and then describing those experiences. This can only be accomplished through the use of qualitative methods. This is further supported by Family Health International (n.d.), who reported, “The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue” (p. 1).

Also included in the description of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon of TAIS, is their perception of how their feedback is used to inform this system at the State level. More specifically, the research questions posed are: What are the lived experiences of principals, connected by, and participating in, the phenomenon of the TAIS process? How do these principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity? These research questions can only be examined through qualitative research methods, given its tenets. Additional justification for using qualitative research for this research study and as the lens by which to examine my research questions is given by Draper (2004) who reported, “Qualitative research thus tends to start with ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ type

questions rather than ‘how much’ or ‘how many’ questions. It is also concerned with examining these questions in the context of everyday life and each individual’s meanings and explanations” (p. 642).

The research questions are historically and contextually rooted. As presented in Chapter One, across the United States, individual states have taken the mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which originated in 2001 as part of the Reformation Era (Foley & Nelson, 2011), and created improvement structures to support schools in need of improvement. The concern with this process is in the description of how the school improvement structures are developed and presented to schools. The clear message is that principals are to implement these structures regardless of how they feel about their worth. Miller-Williams and Kritsonis (2009) challenged this when they reported, “Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization’s overall purpose” (p. 2). This view posits that principals should still take responsibility for pushing back on school reform models and not simply implement what is given to them. Better yet, the State would benefit from involving the most important player in successful school improvement, the principal, when state officials are developing what the model for improvement should be.

This declaration is supported by the idea that we should view “education as communication” (Biesta, 2013, p. 28). It is suggested that there is a difference between being a participant in an activity and simply being trained. According to Biesta (2013), “Training is about those situations in which those who learn do not really share in the use to which their actions are put. They are not a *partner* in a shared activity” (p. 29). In

contrast, the ideal situation is one “...in which one really shares or participates in a common activity, in which one really has an interest in its accomplishment just as others have” (p. 29). It is through this lens, I would argue, that policymakers at the State level would gain better insight into what school improvement structure might serve schools better, and school leaders might see that their “...emotions are changed as a result of the participation” (Biesta, 2013, p. 29).

Phenomenology

As I proposed to interview a small number of school principals who have lived experiences with the same phenomenon of TAIS, and to uncover common themes among their experiences, a phenomenological research design was best. Creswell (2013) stated, “phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” and “the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 76). Once themes were discovered that existed among the participants’ responses, my task as researcher was to describe and explain the findings. Support was given to the selection of phenomenology for my study by Van Manen’s (1990) research that stated, “the task of phenomenological research and writing: to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (p. 41).

The intent of this research was to inform processes used by policymakers at the State level to obtain feedback from principals on their perceptions of the TAIS process. Furthermore, the intent was that policymakers begin to realize how gaining that feedback might better serve the process by which state mandated school improvement processes are created and implemented. Making these connections from my research findings to

the processes used at the State level was best done through phenomenology. As Van Manen (1990) stated, “The interpretive examination of lived experience has this methodical feature of relating the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality” (p. 36).

According to Moustakas (1994), “The challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection” (p. 27). To add further specificity to my research study and the methods used, I examined two types of phenomenological research, hermeneutical and transcendental.

Contrary to hermeneutical phenomenology, which focuses more on the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ experiences, I chose to utilize transcendental phenomenology, an approach described by Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology is an approach that relies more on the researcher describing the lived experiences of the research participants, rather than interpreting them, which is what I did as I was collecting, analyzing, and reporting my research findings. In addition, an important part of this type of phenomenology became well-known by the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and is referred to as bracketing, which was also an important part of my research process. Bracketing, described by Van Manen (1990), is when:

We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character. (p. 47)

Moustakas (1994) described the researcher utilizing the approach of transcendental phenomenology as one who:

...engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (p. 22)

As a researcher, my experience with the TAIS process in the schools I supported was a factor and therefore, bracketing my personal experience was necessary. As reported by Van Manen (1990), “the task of phenomenological research and writing: to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (p. 41) could only be accomplished through transcendental phenomenology if I was able to view the participants’ lived experiences in a way “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). To accomplish this, I needed to utilize the process of bracketing throughout the research process. Before beginning to collect my research, I dialogued with other researchers to process through my own experiences and acknowledge any possible biases I may have had. During the process of collecting my data, I kept a bracketing journal as part of my researcher’s journal. This was a place specifically designed for me to take note of any biases that arose throughout the research process. Finally, I recorded my bracketing in the report of my findings and in my conclusions and recommendations.

Site and Participant Selection

As presented in Chapter Two, the majority of research in the area of school reform models has been conducted in middle schools. There is indication that further research is needed to determine if differences among principals with regard to the level of schooling exist. More specifically, there is a need to conduct qualitative research to determine further perceptions about school reform across the states (Foley & Nelson, 2011). Therefore, to add to the existing body of research, I selected to focus on elementary schools during my research study to collect data from principals experiencing the TAIS process at this specific level of schooling.

Due to this specific focus, the participants in this study included five principals of public elementary schools, not to include charter schools. According to Creswell (2013), when determining sample size in qualitative research it is important to consider the intent, which is “not only to study a few sites or individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied” (p. 157). This coupled with the decision to utilize transcendental phenomenology as the method, justified the decision to use this sample size. I wanted to be able to collect participant data in detail and then be able to describe the participants’ lived experiences, so managing the sample size was critical. Schools were chosen from the central and south Texas area due to geographical proximity and my experience with these regions, and I did not select more than two schools from the same district. For purposes of my study, there was no consideration given to the size or demographics of the schools selected, other than the grade span, which was either pre-kindergarten through fifth grade or kindergarten through fifth grade. The rationale for this grade span is that having to balance the TAIS implementation in the tested grades

while still ensuring adequate instruction is occurring in the non-tested grades in the building, I would argue, plays a role in the principal's perception of the TAIS process. Principals must have participated in the TAIS process while in the role of building principal and the implementation of TAIS must be within the last two years, the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, specifically. These factors are important because perceptions of the TAIS process will differ depending on the role the participants played during the process and their ability to accurately recall their experience. Other factors, like the years of experience as a principal or the background of the principal, were not considerations in the selection of participants. My focus was more on the time period in which they participated in the TAIS process than their time as a principal.

Data Collection Procedures

Although specific criteria were being used to narrow down the sites and potential participants, additional measures were taken prior to applying the previously mentioned criteria to establish a pool of sites and potential participants from which to choose. The TEA publishes a list of final accountability ratings by region in Texas annually. The lists from 2016 and 2017 were used to identify schools in the central and south Texas regions, Regions 13 and 20 specifically, to identify potential candidates for the study. According to those lists, there were six elementary schools in Region 13 and 18 elementary schools in Region 20 that were rated IR in 2016. In 2017, there were 10 elementary schools, (minus the two elementary schools in my current school district, which I excluded) in Region 13 and 19 elementary schools in Region 20 that were rated IR. Using these identified schools as a starting point, I then used my professional network to reach out to individuals in Regions 13 and 20 who know principals meeting my participant research

criteria. My aim was to utilize this network to obtain participants so I did not need to go through the school district approval process for my interviews. This process, referred to as snowball sampling, occurs when “participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study” (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 5). An important piece of information to consider is that the pool of participants was predominantly female. In fact, the principals meeting the research criteria and who fell into school districts where my professional network were of assistance, were all female. Once the participants were identified, I contacted them electronically and by phone in an effort to explain my study and request for their participation. The principals agreed to participate and written permission was obtained. The option to stop participation at any time was given, should the participant have chosen to do so. Once permissions were obtained, the research participants chose the interview site and time that best worked for each individual.

According to Creswell (2013), data collection is not just one step, but a series of activities, referred to as the “data collection circle” (p. 146). Locating a data collection site and participants were necessary steps, and described above. Deciding how to collect data followed, and considering the research method when making this decision is critical as a researcher. According to Fade (2004):

Phenomenology is concerned with human understanding and originated in the ideas of Edmund Husserl, first put forward in 1936. He rejected the view that empirical science is the basis for achieving an understanding of the world, stressing instead the importance of the ‘life world’ or lived experience. He

believed that the core meaning of entities in the world can be understood by intuition. (p. 647)

Therefore, interviews were conducted by way of “an informal, interactive process and utilize open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). This allowed the participants to elaborate in ways they are most comfortable and provides the opportunity for me to collect more meaningful data (See Appendix). Building rapport with the selected participants was a critical part of this process to ensure there was a level of comfortability prior to the interview. As stated by Moustakas (1994), “Often the phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation or a brief meditative activity aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). This was accomplished by having a brief conversation over the phone prior to the day of the interview and investing additional minutes talking with each participant in person, prior to the start of the recording of the interview. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed. Throughout the data collection process, data was stored electronically via audio recordings and typed transcriptions, and stored in multiple locations to avoid any loss of data. In addition, as previously mentioned, I kept a bracketing journal as part of my researcher’s journal during this data collection process. This served as a specific place in which I stored my thoughts and preconceived ideas I had during this phase of my research about the TAIS process. This aided in avoiding limitations in my research.

I also drew on the TAIS documents, which served as additional artifact data for the study. The document used as guidance for schools includes a framework for continuous district and school improvement that includes the following subsections: district commitments, support systems, critical success factors, essential components,

and outcomes (TAIS framework, n.d.). Utilizing this as artifact data provided additional points of reference for comparison with qualitative data collected from participant interviews.

Data Analysis

Before data analysis could begin, I had to organize the data. This involved ensuring all interviews were transcribed, and were readily available and in front of the me. This is not to say that some data analysis may have occurred during the data collection process as well. Deciding on the approach to data analysis required aligning the chosen approach with phenomenological research methods. Van Manen (1990) provides a less structured approach to data analysis via “phenomenological reflection” (p. 77). “Phenomenology as transcendental reflection goes beyond the object as naively seen through empirical perception” and “reflective understanding of experience is an epistemological project: determining how to gain clarity with respect to the phenomena of our world” (Phillips, 2014, p. 611). Considering the chosen method of transcendental phenomenology, data was analyzed following the tenets of Moustakas’ (1994) process. Utilizing procedures of phenomenological analysis involved, “*horizontalizing* the data and regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value” (p. 118). This was done by reading each transcript in its entirety and identifying questions from the interview protocol and responses from participants that aligned to each question. In this initial step of data horizontalizing, each response had equal value. Following the process of horizontalizing, the statements were then placed into “meaning units” (p. 118). During this step of data analysis, the I identified statements that began to re-occur. From “meaning units”, smaller “clusters” or “themes” were then created (p.

118). It was during this next layer of data analysis that further defining the meaning units by re-coding the data occurred. It was through this process that repetitive information or statements were removed. Initial themes were developed at this stage. A final step occurred when the initial themes were re-coded which served to clearly define themes and to discard certain pieces of information that no longer fit into these themes. It was during this step that sub-themes were developed. It was these themes and sub-themes, when combined with the meanings, that aided me in creating descriptions of the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon. According to Creswell (2013), "analyzing the data for themes, using different approaches to examine the information, and considering the guides for reflection should yield an explicit structure of the meaning of the lived experience" (p. 195).

In addition to this data analysis of the participant interviews, I used the same process to analyze my researcher's journal and the TAIS documents, as artifacts. The notes taken in my researcher's journal went through the same steps that included horizontalizing the data, putting statements in meaning units, clusters, and themes. The themes in data were be combined with the themes that surfaced in the interviews. The TAIS documents served as a point of comparison with what the State indicates is the intent of the framework and what the principals' perceptions are of the same framework.

Validation and Evaluation Measures

Phenomenological research has validation measures specific to this method, and as a researcher, aligning the validation methods with my research was critical to the study itself, as well as its outcomes. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is an important part of phenomenological research when determining its validity. They

have identified four criteria of trustworthiness that include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For the purposes of my research study, I focused on credibility and transferability for my validation measures. I ensured credibility by establishing adequate time spent with my participants to gather enough data that I was able to fully describe their lived experiences in my findings. I triangulated my data by utilizing more than one source of data. These included the participant interviews, my research journal, and the review of the TAIS documents provided by the TEA that describes the intended process to be used by schools. I also utilized peer debriefing to talk through my research as this provided an opportunity for someone who is not connected to my research to provide unfiltered feedback. Finally, I allowed for the possibility of transferability by ensuring that I collected descriptive narratives from the participants during my interviews. This provides the reader with enough information to make the determination as to whether or not the research is transferable.

Limitations

Since I, as the researcher, had experience with the TAIS process, one limitation was the possibility of having pre-conceived ideas of the principals' perceptions or allowing my own beliefs about the process and the principals' involvement in the process to cloud the findings. As previously described, my process for bracketing, which included recording my perceptions prior to the start of the research, keeping a bracketing journal as part of my researcher's journal throughout, and reporting openly in my findings, was one way to keep my previous experiences from becoming a limitation. Perhaps another limitation was interviewing principals only from elementary schools. Although there is evidence to support a focus on this particular level of schooling, the

generalizability of the research must be considered. Due to the nature of phenomenological research, the lived experiences described in the findings are specific to the participants in this proposed research study. As Moustakas (1994) explained:

In correcting our conscious experience of things we are often influenced by what other people say they see; we are encouraged to look again, from the perspective of another self. Ultimately, we may be seeking an intersubjective description of what appears as phenomenal. (p. 94)

It is with his words, that the very nature of the research could be a limitation and must be considered when deciding on the applicability of the findings to other research questions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter served to provide an overview of the methodology being used in this research study. Clear justification was provided for the use of a qualitative research design versus a quantitative research design. The research questions posed in this study were presented, along with supporting evidence for the use of qualitative research to answer these questions. Phenomenology, specifically transcendental phenomenology, was also discussed as the chosen research design, due to the intended nature of this proposed study. The intent of the research was to describe the lived experiences of elementary school principals with the phenomenon of TAIS, which is best done using phenomenological research methods. The site and participant selection process, data collection procedures, and data analysis were described. In conclusion, validation measures and limitations were included as the final pieces to this methodology chapter.

IV. FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of principals that participated in a school improvement structure mandated in Texas, the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). I utilized the following research questions as the focus of this research study: What are the lived experiences of principals connected by, and participating in, the phenomenon of the TAIS process? How do these principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity? This chapter includes a presentation of my findings, beginning with an introduction to each participant that includes the principal's experience in education and the history at the current school. What follows is a presentation of the major themes that emerged based on the individual and focus group interview data collected. As stated in Chapter Three, to add to the existing body of research, my focus was on elementary schools to collect data from principals experiencing the TAIS process at this specific level. Differences exist between elementary and secondary schools that are worth noting and may provide different findings. Also included in this chapter are the significant areas of bracketing that, as the researcher, I felt were important to include to achieve transparency in the methodology.

Participant Profiles

The participants in this study consisted of five elementary school principals meeting the criteria defined in Chapter Three, that included: five to seven principals of public elementary schools, not to include charter schools, schools were chosen from the central and south Texas area due to geographical proximity and my experience with these

regions, and I did not select more than two schools from the same district. There was no consideration given to the size or demographics of the schools selected, other than the grade span, which was either pre-kindergarten through fifth grade or kindergarten through fifth grade. Principals must have participated in the TAIS process while in the role of building principal and the implementation of TAIS was to be within the last two years, the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, specifically. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in reporting findings. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants, a breakdown of their years in education, and the history of each participant at the campus that received the IR rating.

Table 1

Research Participant Overview

Pseudonym	Education Experience	History at IR Campus
Shelly	37 years: 17 years teaching, 20 years administration	9 years Principal, IR first time in 2017, TAIS 2017-2018
Bonnie	12 years: 9 years teaching, 3 years administration	1 st year as Principal 16-17, IR first time in 2017, TAIS 2017-2018
Diana	10 years: 5 years teaching, 5 years administration	1 st year as Principal 16-17, IR first time in 2017, TAIS 2017-2018
Paula	23 years: 10 years teaching, 13 years administration	1 st year as Principal 16-17, IR first time in 2017, TAIS 2017-2018
Susie	17 years: 11 years teaching, 6 years administration	1 st year as Principal 16-17, IR first time in 2017, TAIS 2017-2018

Shelly

Shelly has been in education 37 years and followed what is considered a traditional path to becoming Principal. She began in a school district in central Texas where she was a state compensatory teacher, which is a role that provides intervention instruction to students who are struggling academically. Shelly supported students with grammar skills through her work in this position for two years. This led to her becoming a 4th grade teacher in the same school, where she remained for another 15 years. Shelly then moved to a neighboring district in central Texas as an assistant principal, where she stayed for 10 years. Her next move was to her current school district, another neighboring district in central Texas, as the assistant principal for one year before becoming Principal. She has been Principal at her current campus for the past nine years. This campus received its' first IR rating in 2017, and entered the TAIS process in the 2017-2018 school year, with Shelly as the Principal. The campus Shelly served as Principal, and that entered into the TAIS process for the first time in 2017-2018, served grades PK-5 and had 550 students enrolled. The student population consisted of 48% male and 52% female, 50.7% Hispanic and 40% White, 58.5% economically disadvantaged, 18.2% English learners, and 9.6% of the students were receiving special education services.

Bonnie

Bonnie has spent 12 years in education, all in her current school district, which is in central Texas. She taught for nine years at the elementary level, which included experience teaching bilingual students in second, third, and fourth grades. She then moved to a middle school as an instructional coach for one year before becoming the

Assistant Principal at the same school, where she remained in that role for two years. In July 2017, Bonnie returned to the elementary level as Principal and she just completed her first year in that role in 2017-2018, on an IR campus. The school received its' first-ever IR rating in 2017, and in July 2017, Bonnie came into a position of being the 9th Principal in 12 years at the school that just earned its' first IR rating. In addition, the campus had traditionally out-performed the other elementary campuses in the district. The campus served students in Kindergarten through fifth grade and had an enrollment of 579 students. The student population was made up of 48% male and 51% female students, and 77% of the students were Hispanic and 18% were White. The population served consisted of 73% economically disadvantaged, 19% English learners, and 9.7% of students were receiving special education services.

Diana

Diana's 10 years of educational experience has been in two different school districts. She graduated high school and college in the central Texas area, and relocated to North Texas after college graduation and getting married. It is there that she began her teaching career and taught third grade for two years. She relocated to the central Texas area and spent the next eight years in her current school district. She taught third grade for two more years, was the math interventionist for two years, and then became an Assistant Principal. She served in this role for four years, two years each on two different campuses. Diana just completed her first year as Principal in 2017-2018, on an IR campus. The campus was in a unique situation because the IR rating came from the 3rd-5th grade campus' scores from 2017, and in 2017-2018 that campus merged with a Pre-Kindergarten-2nd grade campus. Therefore, the newly formed Pre-Kindergarten-5th grade

campus entered into the TAIS process together. There were 808 students enrolled and the campus was made up of 55% male and 45% female. There were 73% Hispanic and 18% White enrolled that year, with 77% of those students identified as economically disadvantaged, 40% English learners, and 13% receiving special education services.

Paula

Paula's 23 years in education started with 10 years of classroom experience before moving into administration. She served as an Assistant Principal in one Austin-area school district, and then moved to a neighboring district as the Principal. Following her work as a Principal, she moved to a large school district in the central Texas area and began to work in central office as a support to campuses. An opportunity came open in a smaller school district in the central Texas area for the 2015-2016 school year. It was then that Paula was hired in the school district where she currently works. The school district was set to open a new elementary school in 2016-2017, and she was provided the benefit of being able to use the 2015-2016 school year as a planning year. During the planning year, she assisted in the final construction decisions for the school and completed the hiring of her staff. The school opened its' doors in 2016-2017 for the first time, with Paula as the Principal. In the spring of 2017, the school earned its' first-ever rating, as it was a brand new campus. That rating was *Improvement Required*. The campus then entered the TAIS process in 2017-2018, Paula's second year as Principal of this new campus. The campus served 503 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade, with 55% being male and 45% female. The ethnic breakdown of the student population is 91% Hispanic and 6% White. Eighty-eight percent of students were

identified as economically disadvantaged, 63% were English learners, and 6.8% were served in special education.

Susie

Susie has spent the last 17 years as an educator. She began her career in a large school district in the central Texas area as a substitute teacher. Her professional experience in that district included six years teaching fifth grade, two years teaching fourth grade, and three years serving as a science and math instructional coach. Susie then became an Assistant Principal in the same school district, also at the elementary level, for four years. An opportunity presented itself in a smaller school district, still in the central Texas area, to move into the Principal role. Susie has now served as Principal for two years. After her first year as Principal, in 2016-2017, the campus received an IR rating. During her second year as Principal of that IR campus, 2017-2018, she led the school through the TAIS process. The campus served grades Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade and houses 796 students. Hers is the only campus in the district that offers Pre-Kindergarten, so all 223 students eligible for Pre-Kindergarten attended her school. The student body was made up of almost an even split of males and females, 51% and 49% respectively. The ethnic breakdown of students was 70% Hispanic, 17% white, and 9% African-American. There were 86% of the students identified as economically-disadvantaged, 40% were English learners, and 9.4% were receiving special education services.

Interviews

The interview data in this transcendental phenomenological research study consisted of semi-structured interviews with five participants. Following the individual

interviews, a focus group interview was held with four of the five participants. Diana and Susie participated in the focus group and are from two different school districts. Bonnie and Paula know each other as they work in the same school district, and they both participated in the focus group as well. Shelly did not participate in the focus group and is from the same school district as Diana. In total, four principals participated in the focus group, representing three different school districts. It is important to include bracketing at this point in the reporting. During the interviews, I was my own voice inside my head and found myself having to continuously quiet my own voice. I was reminding myself that the intent of the interview process was to allow the principals to have their story heard, not for me to take over the interview by telling my own story. Due to the commonalities I had with the participants because of my previous experience with the TAIS process, I found myself wanting to just talk with the principals. The data obtained from the transcripts of these interviews were analyzed following the tenets of Moustakas' (1994) process described previously in Chapter Three. Once the data analysis process was completed, four themes emerged in the findings: (1) Current State vs. Desired State, (2) Principals set the tone, (3) Inclusivity, and (4) Reflection on the TAIS process. The findings are reported according to these themes and the three sub-themes that emerged for each theme. It was difficult again to stay focused solely on the principals' responses during the data analysis portion of the research, and not judge them. My experience with leading principals in the TAIS process came into play when I read the responses from the interview transcripts about how TAIS went on their campus, and in my head I knew what they were saying was not always based on how I believe the process is intended to be executed. I had to bracket my thoughts and continue to analyze

the data through the lens of solely describing and making sense of the participants' experiences.

Current State vs. Desired State

This first theme emerged in the data analysis when a pattern was detected in the participants' responses that described parts of the school system as they saw them. There was a tendency by the principals to tell the story of their school as it currently was versus how they wanted it to be; i.e., current state versus desired state. In telling their story, they discussed similar data points that became sub-themes: changes in programs and processes, changes in demographics, and building trust with staff, which will be described later. To understand the current state of the participating Principals' experiences with the TAIS process, one must first understand the current state of their campuses.

As previously noted in Chapters One and Three, the theoretical framework for this study was Distributed Leadership Studies (DLS). James Spillane's research and development of DLS is based on two core aspects: principal plus and practice. Principal plus is described as multiple people leading and managing schools, and practice refers to the practice of leading and managing as it emerges from interactions among school leaders and followers (Distributed Leadership, 2010). The DLS framework demonstrates the need for there to be a campus leadership team in place for the Principal of a school to use as an extension of his or her leadership. This important piece of school leadership was missing as reported by the participants.

For instance, when Bonnie started her first year as Principal on the IR campus, she was intentional about meeting with each staff member individually to find out what

the strengths and weaknesses were of the campus in its current state. She reported, “from just that interview process, I found out that there was no leadership team. There were no team leaders. It was kind of in chaos, kind of in shambles.” Also important to note is that staff turnover plays a crucial role in the presence of the DLS framework component of “principal plus”. Bonnie shared that her school has been open for 12 years and she is the ninth Principal; Susie stated that her first year as Principal, “24 new professionals joined the staff”. The absence of consistent campus or district staff creates a situation that could potentially make it difficult for the “principal plus” component to develop. Furthermore, when there is a pattern of staff turnover at either the campus or district level, changes in programs and processes often follow, which is the first sub-theme that emerged and is discussed in the next section.

Changes in Programs and Processes

Whether it is the Principal who is new to the campus, a large number of new teachers, or change in leadership at the district level, these changes in personnel brought changes to programs and processes. The first sub-theme to emerge came in the consistency of the principals’ experiences as evidenced by the reports that there was an over-abundance of inconsistency in the curriculum across their respective school districts. The impact of these changes was felt the most by students, which slowed their academic growth, according to the Principals.

As previously reported in the participant profile, Paula was hired as a Principal in 2015, and was able to use the 2015-2016 school year as a planning year as she got ready to open a new school for the 2016-2017 school year. Paula’s school had only been in existence for one school year, 2016-2017, when it received its’ IR rating in 2017. When

the school opened, new attendance boundaries were drawn and students were coming from different elementary schools in the district, which were each implementing different programs. This was especially true for students in the bilingual program. There was inconsistency with the bilingual model that was to be used district-wide which led to Paula receiving students whose “understanding of English, development of English was all over the place, and now we are trying to put in a late-exit model and our upper grade kids do not fit that model at all.” Another area that lacked structure due to changes in district leadership was the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, which provided an additional example of changes in programs and processes effecting student growth. “Somewhere in between, this group of students weren’t really getting identified for special education services, so last year our fifth graders, I mean I had about 40 kids that were reading at a first-grade level,” Paula reported.

While it may appear that upper grade students were the ones feeling the brunt of the inconsistency in programs, it was consistently reported by the Principals that students were not being adequately prepared in the lower grades. This manifested itself when students reached the STAAR testing grades of third through fifth at the elementary level. Susie, a second year Principal on the IR campus, shared, “When I arrived mediocrity and deficit thinking were the norm.” Diana, who was in her first year as Principal on the IR campus, reported that, “Based on beginning of year data, 44% of our campus was below grade level in DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment)”. Although STAAR assessments are given beginning in grade three, Principals reported that it is important to send the message to all grade levels that they play a part in the success of the campus. As

Diana also shared when discussing what led to her campus becoming *Improvement Required (IR)* based on state assessment results:

The reason why technically was because of fifth grade science...and also for the writing, but when we dug further and you can look at our scores for even reading and math, because science isn't just fifth grade and fourth grade isn't just the writing...you know it isn't the only grade level.

Shelly, although in her ninth year as Principal at this campus, shared in this line of thinking as she stated:

We've gone through...different curriculum people over the last few years and we have not had a solid curriculum program. So writing hasn't happened in every single grade so I feel like the group that hit fourth grade last year just didn't have the foundations that they needed.

Each Principal stated areas where changes in programs were having an impact on their campus and, specifically, with their experience in the TAIS process. In each case, these changes were made by the school district, and the Principals were charged with the implementation. These programmatic changes required a lot of time on the part of the Principal as there were staff changes that accompanied the program model shifts. There were also training requirements for teachers that took time away from the focus on the TAIS process. The Principals mentioned areas that included: moving from an Early-Exit Bilingual Model to a Dual Language Model, shifts in where bilingual students would attend school, the addition of Pre-Kindergarten, bilingual students being transferred to another campus if there was no space in the home campus' classrooms, and the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC's).

In addition to programmatic changes being implemented in a top-down manner, Principals were also attempting to navigate new processes used to monitor these new programs. Susie, who was the Principal for one year when the campus received its' IR rating, felt strongly that a "lack of high academic, systemic, and procedural expectations led to the IR rating" and "little to no monitoring of initiatives occurred previously". The Principals interviewed were keenly aware of the "principal practice" component of the DLS framework that refers to the practice of leading and managing as it emerges from interactions among school leaders and followers (Distributed Leadership, 2010), although they may not have used this term. Developing processes for the implementation and monitoring of new programs is critical to the success of a campus, and while this is a necessary step, it is one that causes additional stress to campus leaders and teachers. Bonnie, who took over as Principal after the school received its' IR rating, had examples of this stress in action when she shared that her teachers:

...Were used to down time, because there was never a requirement of collecting data, meeting with me...then having PLC's to go to, and then this year they did build the schedule to where we had a lot of PD days built into our schedule.

Bonnie did report that these systems have created a way to closely monitor student data and hold each teacher individually accountable, but that it has also added to the teachers feeling overwhelmed.

Changes in Demographics

Not only are teachers contending with the implementation of new programs and processes, Principals reported changes in the schools' demographics as having an impact on student achievement. Previously, in one school district, there were no attendance

zones. This meant that parents had the choice to send their child(ren) to the elementary school of their choice. As Bonnie shared, her school was “the new school in a small community”, which was appealing to parents. She went on to say, “The community grew and there are neighborhoods that are fairly new. It [the school] was close and it was within walking distance.” Add to that, Bonnie stated that the campus had always “outperformed the other campuses”. This is an example of success breeding success. Once the school had the reputation of being the school that did well, the more it attracted students whose parents expected that for their child[ren]. The school district then decided to implement attendance zones. Once this zoning was put in place and students were required to attend their “home school” based on attendance boundaries, Bonnie’s school became a bilingual campus, which it had not been previously. Bonnie did make a connection between the start of attendance zones and the student achievement data dropping. While she did not indicate in any way that this was the sole reason for the decline in test scores, it was discussed as a change on the campus that coincided with an IR rating. Bonnie shared that she felt the teachers were not adequately trained to teach using the bilingual model prior to the bilingual program coming to her campus. She was not blaming students in any way, yet recognizing the need to instruct students differently in order to meet each child’s needs. Diana reported a change in her school’s performance as well that she feels is a result of a change in demographics. She indicated, “They’ve been exemplary in the past, but it slowly has gone down.” The same opinion was shared by Shelly when describing her school’s past performance. She stated:

The first few years we were what I would call an average type school. But then our demographics have really changed over the last couple of years. The parental

support is becoming less and less. We either have them really invested in their child's education, or we don't ever see them.

This statement by Shelly indicates that her perception of the school's performance in the past was more aligned to schools with similar demographics, no better and no worse. She is partially, not wholly, attributing the decline in test scores to the changes in demographics, higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students specifically, seen on the campus as it relates to parental support. She discussed the need for parents to be engaged in their child's learning, and that there are many students whose parents she never sees during the course of the school year. Shelly felt that it needs to be a partnership between the home and the school if the child is to reach their fullest potential academically. With this being said, it is important to consider the varying definitions of "parent engagement". In its' traditional sense, what that term refers to is parents attending social functions at the school. These might include open house, Parent-Teacher Association meetings, parent-teacher conferences, etc. What is important to note is that true parent engagement can take on many forms, and for a changing demographic at Shelly's school, what was not discussed was how they are changing their approach to engage parents. It might be that parents work two jobs or work a shift in the evening because it pays more and are, therefore, not able to attend certain functions. It would be in the campus' best interest to explore different opportunities to engage their parents, and to expand their way of thinking about whether or not parents are truly engaged in their child's learning.

Principals reported the changes in demographics that were affecting them the most were the higher numbers of students in special populations like special education

and bilingual programs. The impact of these changes was felt in different ways by the Principals. Diana stated that her campus felt the change when her school district changed their bilingual program model from late-exit to early-exit. When that change occurred, her campus housed all of the students in the bilingual program for grades third through fifth for the entire district. Diana's school houses many other special programs for high-needs students and her teachers were not prepared for the needs of these students. Paula felt that the high number of special populations of students served at her campus was the reason that more students were not being identified as Gifted and Talented (GT). She reported, "We are about 85% bilingual and like 90% low socioeconomic and so our kids weren't being identified for GT." Paula discussed a breakdown in the identification process and training that teachers received in regards to what behaviors to look for in students who might be considered for GT testing. She felt strongly that students in these populations were under identified as there were bilingual students and students identified as low socioeconomic status that most certainly exhibited GT behaviors and deserved to be tested. Collectively, all of the Principals reported changes in their demographics with statements that included:

Over the past ten years we have seen an increase of over 200 students. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students has risen from 73% to approximately 85% during this time. The number of English Language Learners has increased from 28% to 40%.

"Our free and reduced has gone up. It was probably in the low 50's when I first came and more to the mid 60's now and it just keeps growing each year." Bonnie attributed the implementation of attendance zones to the change in student achievement.

This was illustrated when she said, “About three years ago they started implementing attendance zones, and from that point, the scores have gone down. Last year the scores were at the lowest they have been within the past three or four years.” The Principals stated many facts regarding changes in demographics that cannot be disputed. The increase in enrollment, the increase in the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, the implementation of attendance zones that coincided with a drop in student achievement are facts they shared, among others. What is not fact, however, is that those indicators are *the* reason student achievement scores dropped on their campuses. While it appears that there might be some deficit thinking at play here, there is also evidence that the Principals are aware that teachers need additional training that includes strategies to reach students on different levels and with differing needs. I think it would be unfair to assume, based on the findings, that the participating Principals blame the students. In fact, I would argue, they blame the system that is failing the students. In order for Principals to begin to strengthen the level of instruction each student receives, there must be trust between the Principal and the staff. The third and final subtheme, building trust with staff, of the larger theme, Current State vs. Desired State is discussed in the next section.

Building Trust With Staff

In the descriptions of the current state of the participating Principals’ campuses, the subtheme of trust emerged. Each Principal realized that to move a campus forward and to raise student achievement, teachers must trust their leader, and vice versa. Using DLS as the theoretical framework, Spillane (2009) reminds us that, “Too often, we place the burden for saving a failing school on the principal...” (p. 70) when in reality,

according to the two core aspects of DLS, the principal needs to share that responsibility with a campus leadership team and must nurture leadership through interactions between campus leaders and those that follow. As reported previously in the participant profiles, all participants, with the exception of Shelly, are in their first or second year as principal on the campus with the IR rating. They are in a position of having to build a level of trust with staff who are, at best, skeptical and at worst, resistant. Add to this dynamic, for an IR school that is participating in the required TAIS process, a Professional Service Provider (PSP). The PSP is an external consultant that the TEA mandates the school district hire that serves to help the Principal and the district navigate the TAIS process.

Initially for Bonnie, she experienced, “lots of pushback, lots of negativity” and she felt it was because she was in her first year as Principal at her school, which had just received an IR rating prior to her being named Principal. Teachers who had been at the campus for a while had lived through nine Principals in 12 years. She shared that her teachers, “feel that they’ve been let down and there’s not an eagerness to get to know their administration” because “they’re just going to leave anyway”. She made a direct correlation between that lack of trust in her as a Principal and the “battle with academics” that she encountered once she accepted the job. Multiple Principals shared that their messaging was important from the start so teachers saw the TAIS process as something they would do as a team and they were careful to avoid blaming any one grade level or previous administrator. They spoke of the “balance” that is needed between the requirements of TAIS and the day-to-day work of the school so teachers do not become even more overwhelmed and frustrated.

The TAIS process includes the requirement for a school district to assign a District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI) and to select a PSP. These additional supports are intended to be an extension of the leadership team that supports the Principal and the teachers with the process. DLS would consider this another layer of the idea of principal plus. What was clear was that there was a lack of complete understanding by the Principals as to how PSP's are selected and what control they have over who supports them. This was demonstrated when Diana stated, "I think the State puts out a list of PSP's or something that districts can choose from, but I am not sure who picks the one we will use. I wasn't sure if we could change ours or not." There were two Principals who reported that the PSP they started the school year with was changed after the mid-point of the school year. Although it was reported that they both felt that it was a needed change, the timing of it was not beneficial and they felt that they missed out on months of adequate support. What was apparent was that all Principals felt that once the right PSP was on board, it was a true asset to the Principal and the teachers. Describing the reaction from teachers after their first meeting with the new PSP, Shelly stated, "Even the teachers were amazed, and I could already feel like there was respect there. That relationship was already being built. I just feel like she's going to be a great asset on our campus that we didn't necessarily have in the first go round." Others reported that by having the PSP in their meetings it added a layer of seriousness to the situation. Principals also shared that the relationship of support that was built by the DCSI and the teachers was important. Any time the teachers felt valued because their voices were being heard, their attitudes changed.

As attitudes changed, there was more of a team approach to the work and a feeling that everyone was in it together. Trust was beginning to build, which allowed there to be fewer obstacles that slowed progress. By the end of the school year, Principals reported seeing a shift in almost all teachers. They reported small things like, “I’ve seen a lot of smiling” and “just a lot of positivity”. One Principal shared, “At the beginning, there was a lot of hesitation because they felt overwhelmed. But now I’ve seen that we’re happy and we’re positive about what we’re doing, and we’re seeing achievement go up.” The most telling came from Bonnie who shared reports from her teachers, “Two have come and said, ‘I want to stay’. I’ve had one apology email, ‘I’ve made this year very difficult for you. I’ve been very unprofessional.’ I’ve just seen a big shift.” This speaks to how important it is for Principals to build trust within their campus with all players, including external supports. Participating Principals reported that to do this successfully, it is up to the Principal to set the tone from the beginning.

Principal Sets the Tone

According to a simple search at literarydevices.net, the following is the best definition for the word, tone: “Tone, in written composition, is an attitude of a writer toward a subject or an audience. Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words, or the viewpoint of a writer on a particular subject.” For the purposes of this research, this is the definition used for tone, as it relates to how the Principal of a TAIS campus sets the tone for the work that must be done. In this case, the “writer” is the Principal, the “audience” is the teaching staff, and the “subject” is the TAIS process. As the definition implies, tone is “conveyed through the choice of words”. This is in direct correlation to how the Principal sets the tone for the campus in regards to participating in

the TAIS process. How the Principal approaches the TAIS process with campus staff starting with delivering the message that the campus received an IR rating, is instrumental in how the work will progress from there. Through the data analysis process, this theme emerged as I began to see a pattern in the findings around how the Principal communicated the steps of TAIS to the staff and their confidence in delivering that information. It mattered how they communicated all of the things that are required of the Principal as part of the TAIS process and how the Principal managed those things. How the Principal communicated with staff throughout the year as new requirements emerge and must be implemented was also of importance. Therefore, tone will be discussed within the following sub-themes: Principal knowledge of TAIS, Principal tasks, and Principal messaging.

Principal Knowledge of TAIS

As a campus enters into the TAIS process, the staff looks to the Principal of the school to take the lead and teach them about what is yet to come. For this to happen, there must be a process for ensuring Principals are actually able to provide that guidance and answer the tough questions. Through the interview process, three of the Principals, Shelly, Bonnie, and Diana, shared the fact that their knowledge was lacking when it came to the TAIS process and their ability to lead their campus through the system. There was a difference in experience levels between these three Principals and the remaining two Principals, Susie and Paula, and it is clear that within this group the Principal's knowledge of the TAIS process lies on one end of the spectrum or the other; they are either very familiar with the process or know nothing about it at all.

Of the three Principals who had limited to no knowledge of TAIS prior to entering the process during the 2017-2018 school year, comments were shared that included, “I didn’t know any of that stuff until we had gone IR because I had never been on a campus like that”, “I didn’t know a whole lot being that I was a first year Principal”, “I knew very little because our district doesn’t focus on STAAR. We haven’t really talked about accountability”, and “I became an expert at discipline and restorative justice as an Assistant Principal, so I wasn’t really aware of the entire process and what it entailed”. Bonnie even stated that she was told of the IR status of her campus once she agreed to take the job, and that she needed to prepare for a lot of paperwork and processes. Diana shared misinformation about the accountability system and admitted that she knew nothing of TAIS prior to learning her first year as Principal would be on an IR campus.

On the contrary, two of the Principals interviewed had previous experience on campuses that were IR and served in some type of support role with the TAIS process. Susie indicated that she was “familiar with discovering the root cause of a problem and creating a plan to address it” and that she had “participated in the writing of a Targeted Improvement Plan for three consecutive years”. Paula shared, “When I worked in [another school district], a couple of those schools that I was assigned to were already in the IR process and they were in different years of the IR process. So part of what I did was part of their intervention plan.” Paula also shared her thoughts on the importance of the Principal having an instructional background. Due to the nature of the Principal’s role in the TAIS process, she felt “if you don’t have that instructional leadership background, you definitely will struggle through this process”.

Principal Tasks

Shelly shared that her approach to setting the tone was to not make the TAIS process a part of every conversation or everything they did. To use her words, “I try not to dwell on it with my teachers, because I know they have lots on their plate and I know they already take it very seriously.” Instead Shelly asked questions, “How do you feel your kids are doing?” and “Where, how can I support you?”. She told her teachers, “You just need to come tell me what you need, and how it supports your curriculum. ...they know that I’ll buy. So that’s probably one of the biggest ways I support them.” Shelly learned, however, that she could not assume that just because teachers asked for a resource that they would actually use the resource once it was purchased. She stated, “I have learned the hard way that they don’t know how to use it. ...they’ve got to have training.”

Another important task that Principals reported as contributing to the tone set for the school was modifying the school master schedule to allow for more focused PLC’s. While PLC’s were not a requirement of the TAIS process, they were seen as best practice and a protected time for teachers to review data and make instructional adjustments, which is a TAIS requirement. Shelly adjusted her schedule so that PLC’s were held each morning before the school day began. She found that teachers were able to focus more with this schedule than when they were meeting during their conference period during the day. This dedicated time was also protected time on Shelly’s calendar so she was present in each PLC to help keep the focus on data and instructional practices. She also built time into the schedule for teachers to discuss their most recent book study. Teachers had their choice of several titles and once a month like-book groups came together to discuss

the instructional implications for the book they were reading. Other Principals indicated that they did things like open every faculty meeting by reviewing data and set “specific expectations and timelines for monitoring of implementation of systems and initiatives”.

Perhaps one of the most important tasks of the Principal that helps to set the tone for the entire year and experience with the TAIS process as a whole, is the creation of the Campus Leadership Team (CLT). The CLT is a requirement of the TAIS process as they are the group that will initially work together to complete the root cause analysis needed to write the Targeted Improvement Plan (TIP). Paula shared her process for creating the CLT:

I found the right members of the team that had different experiences. I worked to see, to bring in people that had a variety of different experiences. For example, I had a second grade teacher who I knew when he was in [previous school] had gone through the IR process and how that looked at a small district kind of experience. Even though he was in a lower grade, I felt he was really important to have [as] part of the team. I had one teacher that was new, that came from another district...I knew they know how to use data. I was strategic in identifying the leadership team and the skillset they brought to the group and also how I knew that they would carry the work and bring it out to others.

The DLS connection is seen here as the Principal task of creating a CLT is creating the space for the two core aspects of principal plus and practice. The CLT not only serves as the extension of the Principal, but also serves as the beginning of the interactions needed among school leaders and followers.

Principal Messaging

Principals have the responsibility of communicating with campus staff multiple times each day. The way in which principals communicate determines how the message is sent, and more importantly, how it is received. There are many forms of messaging that principals must be aware of if they are to achieve the desired response from the staff, including: the words used, the emotion behind the words, the written word, and the actions that follow the words. When analyzing the data, the overwhelming responses from the Principals in regards to Principal messaging in relation to TAIS, revolved around communicating the message of balance. Living with the process of TAIS can be overwhelming for all members of a campus and this can be compounded when the message from the Principal is that being IR is the only thing that matters. The Principals interviewed were keenly aware of the importance in their messaging and were careful to provide a balance between the important nature of the work of IR and communicating that it was not the *only* thing that defines the school. As an example, Shelly stated, “I’ve tried to keep it lighthearted. I know some that have taken it very hard. So, we talk about it, but it’s not in a judgmental way.” Diana indicated that she was also trying to create a balance for all grade levels. She reported, “We need to care about it pre-k through second, not just third through fifth. It’s not the end all be all. So, I had to find a nice balance line.” She also shared that her goal was to keep a sense of calm among the teachers while also keeping a focus on instruction. One of the most impactful statements Diana shared was, “I don’t really care about jeans as much, I don’t want to be the jeans police, I want to be the instructional police.” This demonstrates the many hats principals must wear, whether they like them or not. Something as trivial as enforcing the dress

code with teachers can, at times, seem more important than the instruction going on in classrooms. Diana's frustration with trying to keep the focus on instruction versus making sure teachers only wear jeans on days they are permitted, is undoubtedly shared by others.

Bonnie found that it was critical for her to establish a level of importance without placing blame on the previous Principal, as this was her first year on the campus. She told her staff that although she was not on the campus last year, she signed up to be the Principal knowing that the school was IR, so she was in it with them as part of the team. Paula's focus was also on creating balance with her teachers, while seeing herself as the cheerleader. She reported that she told her staff, "Don't forget, we're still IR. Even though we're not an everyday thing, yes, we are an IR campus, but we're going to work through it and do it." She used the phrase, "urgency without a crisis", which tells the story of Principal messaging in the best way possible.

Part of the messaging also comes in the form of being able to communicate to teachers what steps of the process are coming next for them. As Paula shared, "Part of my role is being the communicator, me being able to communicate the pieces in a timely manner and making sure that things are explained so that people understand and not feel so overwhelmed...". The Principals also shared that they were cognizant of the load this would put on the CLT and they wanted to be sure that no one group was overburdened. This was illustrated in Diana's response, "I was trying to avoid IR being another thing to add to the stressor of all of this new".

The final piece of Principal messaging that was evident in the interview responses was the role the Principal plays in keeping the TAIS process and the focus on data monitoring a priority. Susie reported:

The high expectations led to many changes in our staff roster. Teachers that were unwilling to implement the expectations stated during the process are no longer associated with the team. There has been much more positive feedback and celebration of student success.

She also shared that she was able to use the TAIS process and the Targeted Improvement Plan (TIP) to anchor each instructional decision that was made on the campus. If it did not align to the TIP, they did not implement it. Bonnie also shared how she kept her campus focused on the data. She stated, “I’ve been really clear cut with data at my faculty meetings. Once we get our checkpoints in and we have our monthly IStation reports and our data, we talk about it.” This focus on data by all teachers in the building leads to the discussion of the next theme that surfaced in the findings.

Inclusivity

As mentioned in Chapter One, the DLS perspective shifts the unit of analysis from the individual to a web of leaders, followers, and the situation (Spillane et al., 2004). DLS was seen in action as Principals shared their intentional methods for holding all teachers in the building accountable for student achievement. Further evidence of DLS was seen by the school district’s involvement in the TAIS process, and one more layer was evident through the support of the PSPs that worked side-by-side with Principals. This is an area where I, as the researcher, felt it was important to bracket my thoughts as they pertain to the PSP specifically. During the interviews and when reading

the transcripts, I discovered that the PSP that worked with Bonnie and Paula was the same PSP that worked with me in my school district during the 2017-2018 school year. As I listened to the Principals describe their relationship with the PSP and the experience they each had with her as a support to their TAIS work, I found myself disagreeing with what they were saying in my mind. My experience with this particular PSP was very different, and I had to tell myself again, it was not my job to judge their responses, but to hear their story so I was able to describe their lived experiences. As these findings emerged and the connection to the DLS framework became more apparent, the theme of Inclusivity also emerged. For the purpose of this research study, inclusivity is defined as the intentional inclusion of all parties: teachers, district leaders and processes, and the PSP, as a part of the lived experiences of the Principals participating the TAIS process. The findings that surfaced within the over-arching theme of inclusivity make up the three sub-themes that are discussed here: accountability for all, merging with district processes, and internal and external supports.

Accountability For All

As a researcher, I chose to focus specifically on elementary campuses, as mentioned in Chapter Three, to add to the body of research in this area of schooling and because Principals at this level must balance the TAIS implementation in the tested grades (3rd-5th) while still ensuring adequate instruction is occurring in the non-tested grades (Pre-Kindergarten-2nd). Additionally, there is a need to hold all teachers in the building accountable for the results on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) so the burden does not rest solely on those teachers who teach grades three through five. The participant Principals shared that there is an intentional

plan to make sure these things happen in their buildings throughout the school year. Shelly shared that she started with how she allocated her budget. She used part of her federal funds to hire a paraprofessional “just to provide additional support to my K,1, and 2”. Diana stated that she ensured accountability for all because there was a shared idea among her Pre-Kindergarten through second grade teachers that, “We don’t have to take STAAR, thank God”.

Diana was in a bit of a unique situation because she was merging two campuses, one that was previously Pre-Kindergarten through second grade only and the other that was third through fifth grade only. One campus in the mix was completely disconnected from STAAR prior to the school year where they were participating in TAIS, and the other campus was used to testing being at the forefront of everything they did. Diana shared, “I had to be very careful merging, especially with the culture that it’s not [school’s] fault that we are in this boat. I don’t want us to have this STAAR focus either, where we are just drilling and killing”. She wanted to create a new campus culture by bringing these two schools together and embarking on this TAIS journey together, without placing blame. She found herself constantly saying, “It’s not fourth grade, it’s not fifth grade, it’s all of us making sure...” Shelly shared this same line of thinking as she communicated to her teachers, “You can’t teach writing in one year” to illustrate that every teacher in every classroom is accountable for doing their part in preparing students academically. While the responsibility was shared equally the celebrations were also shared equally. Bonnie reported that when her first round of data came back from STAAR:

It was a huge celebration and not only did 5th grade get to celebrate, but I brought it to the faculty meeting and I said, 'Kudos to 5th grade, yes, but kudos to Kinder, 1st, and 2nd because you guys have been laying the foundation. You guys are a part of this.' So it's an entire campus celebration.

Not only was there a focus on all grade levels being accountable, there was also an intentional effort on the part of the Principals to keep a lens on all subject areas.

When a school receives low scores in one content area, there is the risk of focusing all of the instructional energy on that one area and ignoring the others. Principals that were interviewed shared that they were very aware of the need to not lose focus on any one content area, even if it had not been identified as an area that caused the school to be rated as Improvement Required. Shelly, again, allocated her budget to send teachers to trainings at the Region 13 service center in both reading and writing, although writing was the area identified as leading to her campus' IR rating. Susie used the Campus Leadership Team (CLT), that was assembled as part of the TAIS requirements, to provide a voice to all grade level and subject area teachers as a way to make sure that no area was left unmonitored. Bonnie shared that as a part of the data meetings she held with teachers, "special education has to come and bring me their data as well on their kiddo. So everybody's working together because we have a common goal". This has also led to a cross-content focus on identified areas of need. For example, Shelly shared, "in the math area, they have tried to provide writing opportunities for the kids during math and science" as a way to illustrate that writing is not only a 4th grade writing teacher's responsibility. While Principals shared ways they were working to hold

everyone accountable on their campus, the requirements of the TAIS process can be overwhelming if they are in conflict with district initiatives.

Merging With District Processes

Another aspect of the theme of inclusivity as it was defined for the purpose of this research study was the intentional inclusion of district processes as they relate to TAIS. Each school district has its' own way of doing business and ensuring that they are in compliance with requirements of the State. What often happens, is that district leaders continue to add requirements to the plates of Principals without pausing to evaluate how requirements might be merged for alignment. Not only does this strategy of merging processes help to lessen what is on the Principal plate, it serves to ensure that documents and processes are not completed simply for compliance reasons, but because they matter in the realm of increasing student achievement. This sub-theme emerged from the findings shared by the Principals that described how their respective school districts merged district processes with the requirements of TAIS.

Perhaps one of the most consistently shared findings was in the connection the districts made between the campus TIP that was required as part of the TAIS process, to the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) that is required for every school in Texas. Principals shared multiple examples of how their districts were intentional about connecting the two plans to align the work the campuses were doing. Principals were then able to take the CIP and use the quarterly formative checks as their timeframe to review the progress made with the TIP as well. Paula reported that, in her district, there was work done in the summer months in regards to identifying the goals of the CIP for each campus. Teachers were a part of the goal-setting process, so when it was time to

incorporate the TIP and CIP, “it wasn’t completely foreign to the teachers”. There was an indirect benefit of these two plans merging; Principals began to see the CIP as a critical part of their work and not simply a document that is created for compliance reasons. As stated by Diana, “I think you see the value of that true CIP process”.

Principals also reported that their school districts began communicating with them about the TAIS process in the summer, so they were aware of the requirements. This led to the hiring of the PSP in each district so they became a part of the data review and instructional conversations early in the year. Paula explained that although her school received an IR rating that could have caused additional stresses, “I don’t think if anything, that the teachers were stressed because we were IR, it was just as a district, we were already doing changes. So, it wasn’t anything because we are an IR campus”. She also stated that there was a feeling of support from the district throughout the process, which included the sending of the data to the PSP on the Principal’s behalf. Diana described the systems approach taken by her district:

There’s three campuses that are in this status in the district, two of which have brand new principals. So, we talked about, what are the systems that we are going through in [district], and what they did was more of a systems approach.

Paula described a similar process in her district which allowed her to collaborate with each Principal, not only Principals of IR campuses. She stated, “When I talked to other principals, they might not be IR, but they are also in the cycle of looking at our data, looking at improvement, we have these two goals. We all have CIPs that we worked off the district goals.”

At the end of their year participating in the TAIS process, the participant Principals shared take-aways they had in regards to their district's approach and merging district processes with TAIS processes. Statements shared included: "We're doing what's best for kids", "We've gotta have balance", "We're writing a new Targeted Improvement Plan. We may not be IR next year, but this will still be a plan that we implement because it's best practice", and "This is a CIP on steroids for instruction really". While there were a lot of positive things shared in regards to the Principals' experience with TAIS in their respective districts, there were some things shared that were not so positive. The DLS framework emphasizes the need for shared leadership versus a top-down approach. The connection to DLS was heard in the findings from Susie who stated:

It created a platform for change. The process clearly demonstrated a need through our problem statements. Instead of patching up the problem we worked as a team to identify the cause and create a plan together. It wasn't a top-down process. This in-depth study of the campus should be done yearly, regardless of our accountability rating.

Although the use of the CLT created a voice for all grade levels, the downside of this process was that, "Not all members of the Campus Leadership Team communicated the process and outcome with their grade-level team. Those that did share, did not all do so effectively", as shared by Susie. Another drawback was in the level of support by district staff. District leaders at the level of Assistant Superintendent and Director, wear many hats and are charged with many tasks to both implement and oversee. Unfortunately, supporting a campus with the TAIS process is merely one of these tasks. As Shelly

communicated, there are times when circumstances occur and the district person supporting the TAIS process changes mid-year, which is difficult for the Principal. Her support person changed, and was also given additional responsibilities, which led to a lack of support for her and her campus. As stated earlier in Chapter One, the TAIS framework “is designed to establish the foundational systems, actions, and processes to support the continuous improvement of Texas school districts and campuses” (Texas Center for District & School Support et al., n.d., p. 1). Within the TAIS framework, there are district commitments identified that include: Operational Flexibility, Clear Vision and Focus, Sense of Urgency, High Expectations, and District-Wide Ownership and Accountability (Texas Center for District & School Support et al., n.d.). There was evidence of these district commitments in the findings from the participant Principals and there was also a lack of some of these commitments as supported by the negative aspects shared by the Principals. It is these breakdowns at the district level that require the additional use of internal and external supports described in the final sub-theme.

Internal and External Supports

As reported in the findings in the previous section, district leaders did their best to support campus principals with the requirements of the TAIS process. The fact is, however, that there were many factors that interfered with their ability to always provide this needed support effectively. Due to these constraints, Principals were often forced to rely on additional internal and external supports. As the findings were analyzed, the participating Principals’ lived experiences with TAIS presented this as the final sub-theme in the over-arching theme of Inclusivity, as they formed a reliance on these additional supports to navigate the TAIS process.

School districts in the state of Texas are broken up regionally and assigned a region number 1-20. Within each region, districts are supported by a regional Educational Service Center (ESC). All participating campuses in this research study are supported by Region 13. Principals reported utilizing the trainings provided by Region 13 for their teachers as an additional external support. Some Principals reported a lack of district-level instructional support because the district instructional coordinators and specialists assigned to them are spread too thin. Therefore, there is a reliance on regional service centers. In addition to sending teachers to trainings at Region 13, the service center also offers on-site coaching by content areas, if needed. Again, the participant Principals reported utilizing these supports to supplement what the district provided.

As previously mentioned, one of the requirements of the TAIS process is that each IR campus contracts with a Professional Service Provider (PSP). While the participating Principals were each in compliance with this requirement, there were mixed reviews regarding the level of support they received from their PSP. Two Principals reported problems with their PSP that led to a change mid-year. Shelly reported that her first PSP was attempting to dictate to the campus what the focus should be instead of being a support to the CLT in working through the process together. Shelly stated that the PSP would say things like, "I think your goal should be..." and even though the team did not necessarily agree, they went along with the suggestion. Diana struggled in describing the support she had from her PSP when she said, "Why I hesitate on that question is because how much, if I had a different PSP, would that process have looked different?" The other three Principals provided positive reports on their PSP. They indicated that the PSPs were a part of the campus team, walked classrooms with the

Principal to provide feedback, helped the Principal process the data, and assisted in monitoring the TIP. Perhaps Diana said it best when describing the PSP as being a requirement of TAIS, “Maybe that’s a downside, not all PSPs are created equal”.

In addition to the assignment of a PSP, each district with an IR campus is responsible for assigning a District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI). Principals reported that their DCSI was the Assistant Superintendent or the Deputy Superintendent. Again, the feedback provided mixed reviews. Bonnie stated that her DCSI met with her on a monthly basis to review data and let her know what was coming up next according to the TAIS timeline. Her DCSI also met regularly with the PSP for check-ins on how the campus was progressing. Paula shared similar experiences with her DCSI that included regular meetings to look at data and monitor of the progress towards addressing the root cause in the TIP. Susie stated, “We are in constant communication with the DCSI. All TIP work, planning, implementation of initiatives, and major campus decisions are vetted through the DCSI.” These findings describe the lived experiences of Principals participating in the phenomenon of the TAIS process. The final theme serves to describe their reflection on the TAIS process as they come to the end of this lived experience.

Reflection On the TAIS Process

Participant interviews were conducted towards the end of the school year, which allowed the Principals to reflect on how their year as Principal of an IR Year 1 campus went in regards to the TAIS process. As they began to share their thoughts on what worked and did not work within the process itself, three sub-themes emerged in the

findings: timeline and structure, advice to the next IR cohort, and building Principal capacity. These sub-themes are described in the next section of this chapter.

Timeline and Structure

Within this sub-theme, Principals shared their reflections on how the current TAIS timeline for submissions (Figure 5) might be adjusted to allow for a more effective implementation of the TAIS process. The reflections also included feedback on the structure of the required submissions, including the availability of completed examples for Principals to use as a reference. A telling finding lies in the consistency in which the participant Principals shared the need to see exemplars of the TIP prior to being asked to complete their own. The only group of people in education who want to be “right” more than teachers, are their Principals. Diana shared her thoughts on going into the TIP creation blindly:

I’ve always been like, am I doing it right? So we don’t want to be that, this is what you need to do step by step because it’s got to be what’s right for your campus...But it would be really great to be like, ‘What are some steps?’ You are almost coming up with it on your own and I’m like, ‘I’m sure other people have gone through this exact same thing’. Kind of like a menu or an example.

These Principals in the TAIS process understand the need for their TIP to be campus-specific and can see the side of the State in not wanting to provide examples in fear that plans will become cookie cutter, which is not the intent. At the same time, in education, we teach through modeling and providing exemplars and there is a true disconnect when it comes to the TAIS framework in the eyes of the participating Principals.

Along these same lines was the overwhelming finding that IR Principals in this research study saw the need to have support provided by Principals who have actually gone through the TAIS process as an IR Principal, and successfully pulled their school out of that rating. They were looking for lessons learned to be shared and did not experience that during their year as an IR Principal. Paula shared that because she had previous experience supporting IR campuses, she felt she was more prepared than those who had no previous knowledge of the process. She stated, “My advantage was that I knew some that had gone through it. So, if you didn’t have that, then where is that piece? That piece is missing, for sure.” Shelly shared that it would have been helpful for the Principal to get any new information prior to the CLT receiving the information. She discussed that, at times, the PSP would sit with her by herself and watch the next required videos and discuss how the next steps would be implemented. Other times, Shelly received the information at the same time as the CLT. Her reflection was that she was much more prepared to lead her staff when she had time to process ahead of the team.

Another finding that was overwhelmingly consistent across all Principals was that the timing of the entire process needs improvement. The timeline concerns that Principals voiced include: required trainings at Region 13 needed to have happened earlier in the summer, too many requirements in the process that leads to none of them being fully completed, the timeline was not reasonable considering everything else a Principal is responsible for, videos are not engaging, data requested in December from the PSP with no communication in advance about what data should be collected, the official TIP not due until June for the previous school year seemed like an “after-the-fact” approach, and lack of communication from PSP about how to monitor the TIP in advance

led to not having concrete data. Perhaps Paula said it best when describing her reflection on her experience with the TAIS process this year:

One piece that is missing is that principal voice because even when you go to the website and watch the videos, I mean, you have videos from experts... There's no videos of people who have experienced it, that have come out of it to share some of these insights...

Advice to the Next IR Cohort

As the Principals continued to reflect on their year participating in the TAIS process, they continued to communicate things that they wish they knew before starting this journey and that they would share with Principals who may be entering this process for the first time. Bonnie shared her thoughts on the importance of keeping a balance between the IR focus and requirements, and everything else that needs to be done instructionally for students. She stated, "Yes, I think everybody needs to know that we're going to work together, collaboratively, to take ownership of where we are and to work to get out of it, but not always to focus on it." She went on to share, "I'm always showing data but I'm not saying, 'And to get out of IR next year, and we don't want to be IR', I'm not constantly reminding them of the negative." Paula discussed a similar opinion when she shared that not enough teachers know why they are entering into the work of TAIS. She felt it is important to communicate early on that it is not about getting out of IR, but that the process lends itself to doing what is best for kids.

The Principals did share that the work of being in IR adds another level of intensity and requirements and, at the same time, it provides good checks and balances to the work that is being done on the campus. Diana stated, "If we aren't careful, it can

become compliance. ...I did a bunch of walkthroughs. But it really should be about growth and there was a purpose.” Paula shared, “Definitely trust the process...it helps build the capacity of your leadership, leadership team...it doesn’t have to be bad.” Susie’s advice was, “Do not allow staff or students to lose momentum.” This advice is connected to the idea of teachers understanding the process because, in the absence of information, they will create their own stories. Be transparent with teachers and build their capacity along the way. This might look like what Diana reported when she shared, “I don’t have traditional staff meetings. I use my Wednesdays as professional learning...” Even with all of this preparation, as Susie stated, “Be prepared for the push-back and questioning change.”

Building Principal Capacity

Principals can find themselves in a position of being expected to know everything when it comes to leading a school. When faced with leading a school with a rating of IR from the State, Principals reflected on how school leaders need to feel supported and have a network of people to turn to as they navigate the TAIS process. Diana shared an example of this in her district. She reported:

As the three campuses we’ve tried to really support each other in this process, and any trainings really piggy back on each other. There’s a middle school that has also been through a similar process in our district, so kind of bouncing ideas off of them and what they’ve done at that school.

Paula shared a similar experience when she stated, “Working with others was huge.”

Having processes in place for monitoring the requirements of TAIS is critical to its success. The participating Principals saw the benefit of having processes on their

campuses and how it aided them in their work with teachers. Bonnie saw these processes as helpful in having difficult conversations with teachers when she shared, “I think that’s been the strongest point that I’ve had at my fingertips as a first year is, ‘Okay, but this is not showing what you’re telling me, so we’ve got to work together’ when I talk to teachers about their data.” Shelly described how these processes have helped her grow as an instructional leader when she stated:

It’s helped me realize more so when lesson planning is happening what that really should look like as I’ve done walkthroughs this year and I’ve listened to all the different questionings that are being asked. We’re not to the rigor that we need to be. Then I think it’s going to help me with even more of a focus for PLCs next year.

Diana shared her thoughts on how the processes within TAIS have helped her when she explained, “I think as far as what’s good about the process is really going to that root cause, and we had a discussion about what’s in our control and what’s out of our control.” Principals also shared that they have learned more about certain campus processes that they feel they should have known all along. Things they shared included: knowing how to correctly write a Campus Improvement Plan, what to look for when doing walkthroughs in classrooms, how to use the data to inform instruction, and how to adequately monitor student progress.

What was apparent through the participant interviews is that Principals participating in the TAIS process have a lot to say in regards to their lived experiences and things that worked and did not work in regards to the school improvement process currently being used in Texas. Principals shared that they were not asked to give input or

to provide feedback by any stakeholder in the TAIS process. The only exceptions reported were by Shelly and Bonnie who said respectively, “I did do a survey. A PSP survey for Region 13” and, “We did get a survey, but it was to survey our PSP for the year, but that was the only thing”. It is important to note, however, that this survey was in regards to the performance of the PSP, not the TAIS process. Shelly was unclear who else might have received this survey or how the results of the survey will be used. In the final words from the Principals, they were not asked to provide input or give feedback on the TAIS process. As Diana stated, “There’s no feedback from us, as far as I know.” Most eloquently stated by Bonnie when asked about sharing her suggestions for improvement, “. . .that would be a very great idea, because I could definitely share some of that!”

Principal Recommendations

As a final step in the collection of data, the participating Principals were invited to take part in a focus group interview to answer the final research question: What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity? All Principals, with the exception of Shelly, joined the focus group interview and shared their thoughts regarding recommendations to the TAIS process, which are listed below and followed by a brief description:

1. Adjust the timeline of required trainings and completion of required activities to begin in the summer rather than after the school year is underway.
2. Provide a template for required submissions rather than having school districts create their own.
3. Provide completed examples of required plans as exemplars.

4. Enhance the website resources for districts and campuses to access.
5. Provide better training and monitoring of PSPs and provide guidance to districts in selecting a PSP.
6. Provide differentiation to the process to allow for unique campus situations.
7. Develop cohort teams of IR schools in the same region with required check-in meetings to serve as a support system.
8. Identify mentor schools within comparison groups for IR campuses.

The Principals recommended that the timeline be adjusted to start working on the required trainings and activities during the summer rather than after the school year begins. During the year the Principals participated in TAIS, the initial communication from the regional service center regarding the process and its' requirements did not come until the end of August 2017. Schools did not attend their first training with the service center until October 2017, yet their initial plan that identified the targeted elements they were going to address during the 2017-2018 school year had to be approved by their local school boards in August 2017. This served to create a large amount of confusion and uncertainty among the principals who were charged with leading the TAIS process on their campuses. The focus group's recommendation to adjust the timeline to start earlier in the summer would allow campuses to attend required trainings before the start of the new school year so they are better able to prepare staff for what is to come and to begin working on creating required plans.

As part of the TAIS process, schools are required to submit a Targeted Improvement Plan (TIP) that identifies their problem areas, along with goals and strategies to improve those problem areas. As previously mentioned, the trainings for IR

schools came after plans were due. Knowing this, the focus group recommended that the TEA provide examples of templates that can be used by schools in completing the required plans. Better still, the focus group recommended that there be exemplars of completed TIPs shared with schools and school districts, which would serve to take the guess work out of completing the required plans. These resources could be shared on the website that is currently available to schools in the TAIS process. Strengthening the resources available on the website was also a focus group recommendation. The group mentioned that there are currently videos shared on the website, but they are from professionals in the field and researchers, not principals who have been through the actual TAIS process. The focus group felt that the State was missing an opportunity to showcase principals who successfully pulled their schools out of IR status by not using them as the spokespeople for the TAIS process. Principals want to hear from other principals who have the lived experience with TAIS that they are about to encounter themselves, not experts who have not experienced TAIS for themselves.

Hiring a PSP as an external support to districts and campuses is a requirement of the TAIS process as mandated by the State of Texas. The focus group of Principals recommended that there be additional training for PSPs across the state. There were varied experiences reported by the Principals in regards to their PSP, yet what was common among them was the agreement that there needed to be more oversight in the performance of the PSP and guidance provided to districts in what to look for when hiring a PSP. The intent of the position is to support the district and guide them through the TAIS process, yet the Principals reported this support was inconsistent in their experiences.

A recommendation was made to differentiate the TAIS process so the differing needs of schools are taken into consideration. It was reported earlier in the findings that some of the participating schools were in a situation where they were combining campuses and had no historical context to pull from on their own campus. The focus group felt that these types of situations are not considered in the requirements of the TAIS process and recommend that this component be added to allow for the different circumstances that may exist in schools.

The participating Principals that had other schools in their district that were also IR and going through the TAIS process, reported that they were able to collaborate throughout the school year and found that to be a great benefit. This led to the recommendation that the State identify cohorts of IR campuses in the same region and hold check-in meetings for those cohorts where schools would come together to share ideas and successes with each other. This discussion led to the final recommendation from the group which was to identify mentor schools that would be paired with IR schools as another layer of support. The mentor schools would be schools who were former IR campuses and successfully came out of IR status. The Principals of these schools would be paired up with Principals currently in the TAIS process and mentor them throughout the school year. This would serve as an additional layer of support to IR Principals and allow them to hear what worked from Principals who share the lived experience of the TAIS process.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented an introduction to each of the five participating Principals, and gave an insight into their experience in education and at their current school, which

was the school that received the IR rating from the State. There was also information presented that allowed the reader to develop a better picture of the demographics of the IR campus that was participating in the TAIS process. What followed next was an explanation of how the major themes developed through the data analysis and why that theme was chosen. Each of the four themes also had three sub-themes presented in this chapter that provided the reader with a more in-depth look into the lived experiences of the participating Principals. In conclusion, recommendations were shared that came from the Principal focus group, that included ways to make the TAIS process stronger for Principals and for schools. What was evident in these findings was the voice of the Principal needs to be heard as they have a lot to offer State officials when it comes to living with the process of TAIS.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of the Study

Across the United States, individual states have taken the mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which originated in 2001 as part of the Reformation Era (Foley & Nelson, 2011), and created improvement structures to support schools in need of improvement. The concern with this process is in the description of how the school improvement structures are developed and presented to schools. The clear message is that principals are to implement these structures regardless of how they feel about their worth. Miller-Williams and Kritsonis (2009) challenged this when they reported, “Leaders perform a valuable service when they discern that a venerated system or process has outlived its usefulness, or that it is operating as originally designed but against the organization’s overall purpose” (p. 2).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of principals participating in the TAIS process, to include their perception of how their feedback is used to inform the process at the State level. Through the application of the DLS framework, which posits that, “Leadership activity is constituted – defined or constructed – in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10), this research study sought to answer the following three research questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of principals connected by, and participating in, the phenomenon of the TAIS process? (2) How do these principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? (3) What recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity?

This study increased the body of literature that focuses on the elementary school level, specifically, and provided a space to capture Principals' feedback on the TAIS process that can possibly serve to improve these processes in the future. I was able to provide a detailed description of the lived experiences of Principals participating in the TAIS process within the last two years, which has not previously been done. Good and McCaslin (2008) determined that school reform initiatives can profit from more research on participant perceptions, and this research served to add to the body of literature on that topic. In addition, I applied Spillane's (Spillane et al., 2004) DLS framework to examine the TAIS process at the State level.

Discussion of Key Findings

This chapter of the study discusses two key findings that emerged from the data analysis. The first key finding is in connection with the second research question: How do these Principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process by the State of Texas? The participating Principals overwhelmingly agreed that their feedback is *not* utilized because no one at the State level is asking for it. The second key finding discussed in this chapter is in connection to the third research question: What recommendations for the TAIS process would Principals make to the State, given the opportunity? The key finding here was that, when provided the opportunity to give recommendations, Principals that have actually participated in the TAIS process have valuable recommendations to make to the State. They simply need to be asked. The following sections provide a description of the key findings as they relate to the research questions, and the use of the DLS framework.

Finding One: The Absence of Principal Feedback at the State Level

As I reviewed the descriptions of the lived experiences of the participating Principals, there emerged the key finding that the overwhelming perception was that Principal feedback is *not* utilized to inform adjustments in the TAIS process at the State level, in regards to the TEA and State legislators, specifically. The Principals' perception is based on the fact that, during their year of TAIS implementation, no one asked them for feedback. Through my interviews, I collected information that spoke to the connection Principals made to the importance of hearing the voices of critical partners in the TAIS process. This was illustrated when Principals shared that the supportive relationship that was built between the DCSI and the teachers was critically important to the success of the TAIS process on their campus. According to the Principals, any time the teachers felt valued because their voices were being heard, their attitudes changed.

As attitudes changed, there was more of a team approach to the work and a feeling that everyone was in it together. Trust was beginning to build, which allowed there to be fewer obstacles that slowed progress. By the end of the school year, Principals reported seeing a shift in almost all teachers. They reported small things like, "I've seen a lot of smiling" and "just a lot of positivity". One Principal shared, "At the beginning, there was a lot of hesitation because they felt overwhelmed. But now I've seen that we're happy and we're positive about what we're doing, and we're seeing achievement go up." The most telling came from Bonnie who shared reports of her teachers, "Two have come and said, 'I want to stay'. I've had one apology email, 'I've made this year very difficult for you. I've been very unprofessional.' I've just seen a big shift." This speaks to how important it is for Principals to build trust within their campus

with all players, including external supports. This example is a direct reflection of the DLS framework in action, specifically the key aspect of the framework, which is in the interaction of leaders and followers and their situation. When the Principal, as the leader, was able to build trust with the followers - the teachers, the situation - the TAIS process, improved. The key to this happening, according to the Principals, was the teachers' voices being heard. This lays the foundation for the application of the DLS framework to the State level, specifically in regards to the TAIS process.

Better yet, the State would benefit from involving the most important player in successful school improvement, the principal, when state officials are developing what the model for improvement should be. This declaration is supported by the idea that we should view "education as communication" (Biesta, 2013, p. 28). It is suggested that there is a difference between being a participant in an activity and simply being trained. According to Biesta (2013), "Training is about those situations in which those who learn do not really share in the use to which their actions are put. They are not a *partner* in a shared activity" (p. 29). In contrast, the ideal situation is one "...in which one really shares or participates in a common activity, in which one really has an interest in its accomplishment just as others have" (p. 29). It is through this lens, I would argue, that policymakers at the State level would gain better insight into what school improvement structure might serve schools better, and school leaders might see that their "...emotions are changed as a result of the participation" (Biesta, 2013, p. 29).

Finding Two: Principal Recommendations to Improve the TAIS Process

As a final step in the collection of data, the participating Principals were invited to take part in a focus group interview to answer the final research question: What

recommendations for the TAIS process would principals make to the State, given the opportunity? The second key finding showed that, when provided the opportunity, Principals have a lot to offer in regards to feedback to strengthen the TAIS process. In connection to the DLS framework and its' application at the State level, hearing the Principal voice is a missing key component. Just as the Principals reported that when teachers' voices were heard, trust was built, and a team effort was seen in moving the work of the campus forward, this same result would most likely be seen if the State were to utilize the DLS framework as well.

One example of a recommendation from the focus group that demonstrates an area where the State, TEA and legislators, *could* be utilizing the DLS framework, specifically in regards to the “situation” is to adjust the timelines or required trainings and to provide exemplars for the required TIP. As discussed in Chapter Four, the focus group's recommendation to adjust the timeline to start earlier in the summer would allow campuses to attend required trainings before the start of the new school year so they are better able to prepare staff for what is to come and to begin working on creating required plans. The focus group also recommended that the TEA provide examples of templates that can be used by schools in completing the required plans. Better still, the focus group recommended that there be exemplars of completed TIPs shared with schools and school districts, which would serve to take the guess work out of completing the required plans.

A second opportunity where the State *could* be utilizing DLS is in regards to the “Leaders” prong of the framework. Strengthening the resources available on the TAIS website was a focus group recommendation. The group mentioned that there are currently videos shared on the website, but they are from professionals in the field and

researchers, not Principals who have been through the actual TAIS process. The focus group felt that the State, the TEA specifically, was missing an opportunity to showcase Principals who successfully pulled their schools out of IR status by not using them as the spokespeople for the TAIS process. Principals want to hear from other Principals who have the lived experience with TAIS that they are about to encounter themselves, not experts who do not have this experience. Another example of a missed opportunity by the State, the TEA and region service centers, in regards to the “Leaders” prong of the framework was the absence of a network of support schools for IR campuses. As reported in Chapter Four, the participating Principals that had other schools in their district that were also IR and going through the TAIS process, reported that they were able to collaborate throughout the school year and found that to be a great benefit. This led to the recommendation that the State identify cohorts of IR campuses in the same region and hold check-in meetings for those cohorts where schools would come together to share ideas and successes with each other. This discussion led to the final recommendation from the group which was to identify mentor schools that would be paired with IR schools as another layer of support. The mentor schools would be former IR campuses that successfully came out of IR status. The Principals of these schools would be paired up with Principals currently in the TAIS process and mentor them throughout the school year. This would serve as an additional layer of support to IR Principals and allow them to hear what worked from Principals who share the lived experience of the TAIS process.

The third prong of the DLS framework is “followers”, and at the State level, those are the school and district leaders. Another missed opportunity by the State where they

could be utilizing DLS brings this research study full circle. What the key findings demonstrated was the need for the State leaders to create a space to hear the Principal voice, which is currently not being heard at all. Principals demonstrated through this research study that they have valuable feedback to offer in all aspects of the TAIS process, and no one is listening. Based on my key findings, I argue that no one is even asking.

Implications

Implications for Research

This study was conducted to provide a space to describe the lived experiences of Principals participating in the State mandated TAIS process as part of the reform process in their school. Additionally, this study aimed to determine how Principals perceive their feedback is utilized to inform the TAIS process at the State level, and to collect recommendations from Principals on how to improve the TAIS process. Through my analysis of the data collected, and the presentation of key findings, an additional resource was created that can be used by Principals participating in the TAIS process in the future, district leaders supporting these Principals, and by State leaders; the TEA, the Division of School Improvement within TEA, specifically, and policy makers.

As was stated in Chapter One, this study added a contribution to the literature on this research topic by specifically reporting findings from elementary principals, which had not been previously reported. While this is a step in the right direction and this study served to begin to fill the gap in the literature, there is still a need to expand the research of principal voices at the elementary school level. Foley and Nelson (2011) found that more research is needed in elementary and high schools to measure the impact of AYP on

principals' satisfaction. This creates additional implications for further study in that more research is needed at both the elementary and high school level in regards to school reform models. Through this needed research, the door is opened to providing a space for more principal voices to be heard.

Finally, this study applied the DLS framework to the State level, which was a deviation from the original applicability of the DLS framework to the campus level, specifically. There were direct comparisons made to the use of the framework at the State level in the key findings, and this opens the door for future research to apply this further in other schools. This conversation among researchers could also open the door to applying other frameworks that might have previously been used only at the campus level, to the State level. This may provide additional insight for State leaders to begin to approach their work differently.

Implications for Policy

This research study provided a foundation that could be used by State leaders responsible for creating the policies that dictate the current reform model in Texas, TAIS. There are current House Bills in place that have a direct impact on the TAIS process and the requirements that come with it. Recently, in 2015, HB1842 was passed by the Texas legislature which added new requirements to the TAIS process for schools that have received an IR rating for two or more consecutive years. What is evident is that the top-down approach for school reform has no signs of slowing down. This is true, even though Gross et al. (2009) reported that, even in Texas, studies show that students have not made significant gains in schools that were implementing mandated CSR models. In response to the inconsistencies reported by Principals in regards to their understanding of

the TAIS process and the continuous improvement cycle in general, there are also implications for colleges of education and leadership preparation programs. Perhaps this demonstrates the need to evaluate the connection between the school improvement process and principal preparation. If the message is that this model of continuous improvement is good for all schools, it seems reasonable to expect that it is a part of all preparation programs in the future.

Although our State leaders do not appear to be seeking new ways to construct school reform models, perhaps they could at least *listen* to the Principals' voices that have been given volume in this study. They have valuable feedback to offer and insight into how to make the process more effective for schools, and ultimately our students. Principals shared that they were not asked to give input or to provide feedback by any stakeholder in the TAIS process. The only exceptions reported were by Shelly and Bonnie who said respectively, "I did do a survey. A PSP survey for Region 13" and "We did get a survey, but it was to survey our PSP for the year, but that was the only thing". It is important to note, however, that this survey was in regards to the performance of the PSP, not the TAIS process. Shelly was unclear who else might have received this survey or how the results of the survey will be used. In the final words from the Principals, they were not asked to provide input or give feedback on the TAIS process. As Diana stated, "There's no feedback from us, as far as I know." Most eloquently stated by Bonnie when asked about sharing her suggestions for improvement, "...that would be a very great idea, because I could definitely share some of that!"

Recommendations for Future Research

As I was coming to the end of reporting my findings, I found myself wondering how the Principals that participated in my research fared in the 2018 accountability ratings. I took the time to investigate on my own, outside of the research specifically needed for this study. This led me to a recommendation for future research. It would be beneficial, in my opinion, to conduct case studies that follow specific principals participating in the TAIS process throughout their year of implementation. This would provide further insight into how they navigate the requirements of TAIS, while providing another space for their voices to be heard in regards to their experience and recommendations for the betterment of the process. There could then be correlations made between how principals implement and navigate the TAIS process with the results their schools achieve in the state accountability ratings. As was mentioned in Chapter One, at the conclusion of this study, there were adjustments being made to the TAIS process. Therefore, conducting case studies would also provide the context for reflection on the new processes that may be in place in the future. Comparisons could then be made between principal perceptions of the TAIS process versus the new school improvement model.

While these additional research studies will offer additional insight into principal voice and will serve to offer improvements to the State Legislature and the TEA, an additional data set that is recommended for further review is what protocols other states use to garner principal voice. Texas is not the only state dealing with the need and requirement of school improvement processes, as was stated in Chapter One. We should

be looking to other states, not just to see processes, but to investigate what systems might already be in place to capture feedback from principals.

There were possible limitations in this study that should be considered when planning for future research studies. The use of DLS as the framework could possibly be seen as a limitation due to the fact that it is contradictory to how the school system operates at the State level, within the TEA. This framework was chosen, however, because the research cited in this study shows that DLS works at the campus level, so the ideal operation at the State level would mirror this same framework. Another possible limitation was that there were no direct interview questions asked in regards to the feelings of stress that participating Principals may have felt in the TAIS implementation year. While these feelings may have emerged naturally, there were not specific findings that illustrated Principals feeling this way. Perhaps asking more direct questions in this area may have provided additional findings. This leads to a final recommendation for future research that includes the impact that going through this process might also have on teachers, students, parents, and the community.

Summary

In summary of this research study, I can conclude that school principals do the work that is required for school improvement, specifically the implementation of the TAIS process, regardless of the supports that are in place. The question that I am left with is why they should be forced to figure out how to navigate this system on their own. As was stated in Chapter Two, according to Spillane (2009), “Too often, we place the burden for saving a failing school on the principal, perpetuating a view of successful school leaders as heroes and less successful ones as failures” (p. 70). DLS research

shows successful schools lead through the use of this framework. I conclude with the argument I began with, if schools have seen success leading with the DLS framework, why should the State not do the same.

State Required Assessment	Years	Grades and Subjects	Intent	High Stakes
Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABs)	1980-1985	February administrations for grades 3, 5, 9 in mathematics, reading, and writing	Assess basic competencies	No
Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS)	1986-1989	February administrations for grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. October and May for grades 11/12 in mathematics, reading, and writing	Assess minimum skills. Implement high stakes at high school level.	Yes. Students required to pass grade 11 test to receive a high school diploma
State Required Assessment	Years	Grades and Subjects	Intent	High Stakes
Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)	1990-1993	Fall administrations for 3, 5, 7, 9, 11	Shifted focus from minimum skills to academic skills that must assess problem-solving skills and complex thinking	Graduation exit-level requirement
TAAS	1994-2002	Spring administrations for 3-8 and 10 reading and mathematics; 4, 8, and 10 writing; 8 science and social studies.	More grades assessed. Grade 10 TAAS became the exit-level assessment	Graduation exit-level requirement
State Required Assessment	Years	Grades and Subjects	Intent	High Stakes
End of Course	1994-2002 and 1998-2002	Algebra I and biology (1994) English II and U.S. History (1998)	Administered to students at the end of a course	No. However, the EOC assessments could be used in place of the TAAS exit-level tests for graduation purposes
Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)	2003-2011	Spring administrations. 3-8 reading and mathematics; 4 and 7 writing; 5 and 8 science; and 8 social studies. Exit-level (grade 11) ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies.	Required to be more comprehensive than previous tests and had to measure more of the state curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)	Grade promotion requirements for reading and mathematics in grades 3, 5, and 8 (later amended to be 5 and 8 only). Graduation exit-level requirement

Figure 1. History of state assessments in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)	2012-present	Spring administrations. 3-8 reading and mathematics; 4 and 7 writing; 5 and 8 science; and 8 social studies. End-Of-Course (EOC): English I and II, Algebra I, Biology, and US History.	Required to be more rigorous, testing course-specific content on EOC's, and links reading and math from grade to grade and to postsecondary readiness standards	Grade promotion requirements for reading and math in grades 5 and 8. Graduation requirement – EOC's
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Figure 2. Addition to history of state assessments in Texas.



District Coordinator of School Improvement Job Description 2018-2019
Overview
The DCSI oversees the work of school improvement as a required member of the Campus Intervention Team (CIT), leads and participates in the needs assessment, improvement planning, and monitoring processes, and ensures requirements and submissions are completed on time. The DCSI serves as an advocate for the campus, communicates high expectations, a clear vision and focus on learning, a sense of urgency, assures operational flexibility, and coordinates district support to improve campus performance and create the district conditions needed to sustain this improvement.
District coordinators of school improvement (DCSIs) are district-level leaders, preferably the supervisor of the principal of the Improvement required or Comprehensive campus, designated to ensure support for the academic achievement of low-performing campuses. DCSIs are responsible for the implementation of all intervention requirements. A DCSI is a required member of the campus intervention team (CIT) assigned to campuses with low performance in the state accountability system as stipulated in Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §97.1063 and/or serves to support schools identified for Comprehensive support under ESSA. The DCSI must be in a leadership position in school improvement, curriculum and instruction, principal supervision, or in another position with responsibility for student performance. Beginning in the 2019-2020 school year, the DCSI must be the supervisor of the principal at the Improvement Required (IR) campus.
In larger districts, the DCSI may coordinate the work of a team of district personnel charged with school improvement efforts. These team members, like the DCSI, must have direct knowledge of the IR campus and exhibit the same qualities as the DCSI.
Characteristics of an Effective DCSI:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is accountable for the success of campuses and/or the district in improvement ▪ Possesses expertise in planning, implementing, and managing improvement efforts at the campus and/or district level ▪ Possesses the time to effectively fulfill this role as an integral part of his/her responsibilities ▪ Leads all components of continuous improvement processes ▪ Maintains a direct line of contact with the superintendent and other critical district personnel ▪ Holds a position of authority to influence central office departmental procedures ▪ Possesses successful leadership and management experience ▪ Understands current state accountability systems and federal requirements ▪ Acts as a positive change agent, uses failures as opportunities, and celebrates success ▪ Maintains results-orientation ▪ Promotes the achievement of goals in a spirit of collaboration ▪ Practices strong communication skills ▪ Skilled in data analysis and root cause analysis
Roles and Responsibilities of a DCSI:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Has knowledge of all school and/or district improvement requirements and board policies and procedures ▪ Partners with the professional service provider (PSP) and the local ESC staff to improve student performance that results in positive change in the campus and/or district accountability ratings ▪ Facilitates continuous improvement and ensures the participation of all relevant staff in intervention requirements. ▪ Ensures campuses are provided operational flexibility

Figure 3. DCSI job description (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

▪ Possesses extensive knowledge of data analysis and process monitoring
▪ Effectively and regularly communicates, meets, and takes an active role in problem-solving with the PSP, local ESC personnel, TEA, and staff of the campus(es) identified for improvement
▪ Removes district barriers that may hinder the improvement process
▪ Provides support and feedback to the principal
▪ Oversees the development and implementation of targeted improvement plans, and facilitates the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to make conclusions and take timely action toward meeting annual goals
▪ Attends campus and/or district leadership meetings regularly and coordinates the work of other district personnel who are responsible for supporting the underperforming campus(es)
▪ Attends required TEA or ESC trainings, including virtual trainings offered throughout the year
▪ Has knowledge of all school and/or district improvement requirements and board policies and procedures
▪ Attends required TEA or ESC trainings.

Updated 8/13/2018

Figure 3. (Continued)



PSP Job Description 2018-2019	
Overview	
Professional service providers (PSPs) are experienced, quality educators who provide technical assistance and support to districts with campuses identified as Improvement Required in the Texas Accountability System or for Comprehensive support under the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). PSPs are an extension of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and ensure that district and school leaders are engaging in interventions that improve campus performance and create the district conditions needed to sustain this improvement.	
Qualifications	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Master Degree in Education or related field (required) ▪ Doctorate Degree in Education or related field (preferred) ▪ Current administrative certificate (preferred) ▪ Leadership coaching certification (preferred) 	
Experience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experience as a campus, central office administrator, or teacher leader ▪ Experience with state and federal accountability systems ▪ Experience in conducting needs assessment, including data and root cause analyses ▪ Success in designing and implementing research-based programs to address school improvement needs ▪ Experience providing professional development to experienced educators ▪ Successful school turnaround experience as a campus administrator (preferred) 	
Special Knowledge & Skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowledge of federal and state school improvement requirements including, but not limited to ESSA, the Texas State Accountability System, and Texas Title 1 Priority Schools (TTIPS) ▪ Knowledge of the principles of school turnaround, turnaround leadership, and current educational research in school improvement, and the ability to quickly apply them, as appropriate, at the district/campus level ▪ Ability to accurately analyze data and assess systems to identify root causes of low performance ▪ Knowledge of systematic planning practices, program evaluation, and district operations ▪ Oral communication skills that engage district/campus leadership in reflective dialogue ▪ Coaching skills that demonstrate active listening, reflective questioning, and full engagement ▪ Understanding of district perspectives of organizational structure, communication, and collaboration across work groups to support and leverage for campus success ▪ Ability to work in a fast-paced, team-focused environment with multiple groups ▪ Ability to influence stakeholders in a results-oriented way so campus, district leadership, and ESC personnel collaborate to ensure successful outcomes that meet or exceed state requirements ▪ Ability to manage multiple projects and meet deadlines ▪ Technical writing skills that capture evidence in a clear, concise, and objective manner 	
Responsibilities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensures that campus is engaging in interventions: developing a plan and implementing the plan with fidelity 	

Figure 4. PSP job description (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adheres to the Code of Ethics and Standard Practices for Texas Educators and the PSP Network guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exemplifies the trustworthiness and integrity necessary to lead adults and model core values regarding confidentiality, punctuality, work focus, and quality of product
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Serves as a liaison between the Statewide Support Partners, Texas Education Agency (TEA), local education service center (ESC), and the District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Serve as a member of the campus intervention team (CIT) (TAC §97.1063, Campus Intervention Team)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensures effective implementation of the school improvement process and works with DCSI on required interventions and submissions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assists the campus with TTIPS grant requirements, when applicable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Works with district and campus staff to ensure their understanding of the current accountability system
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Maintains a positive problem-solving attitude and acts as a positive change agent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seeks out and is responsible for personal, ongoing professional learning and attends all required trainings outlined in the PSP Network Handbook

Updated 8.13.2018

Figure 4. (Continued)

2017-2018 1st Year IR Intervention Calendar

Purpose: Implement targeted elements of the campus improvement plan while intentionally learning the continuous improvement framework to address systemic issues and develop a targeted improvement plan that promotes sustainability.

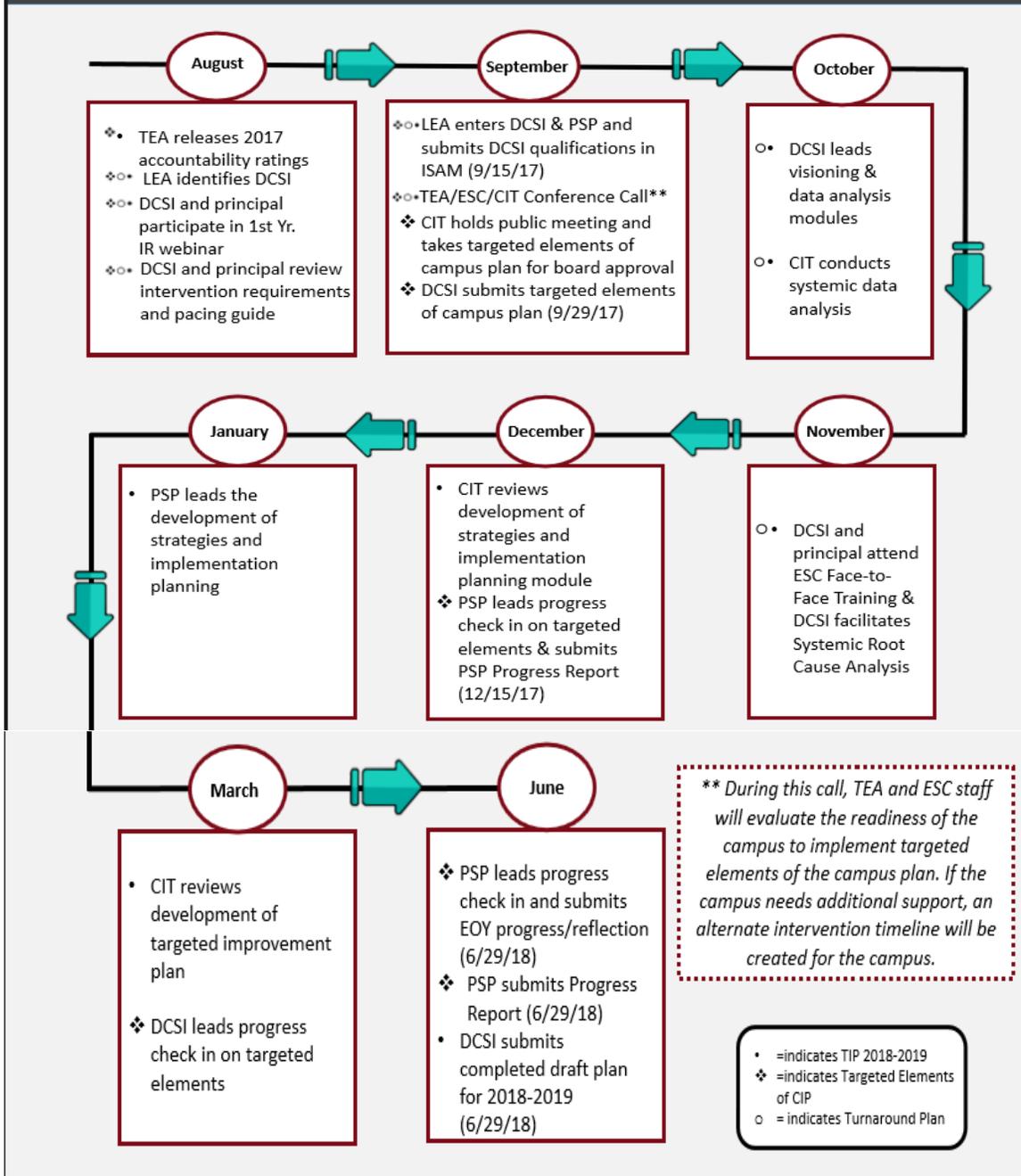


Figure 5. 2017-2018 1st year IR intervention calendar (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

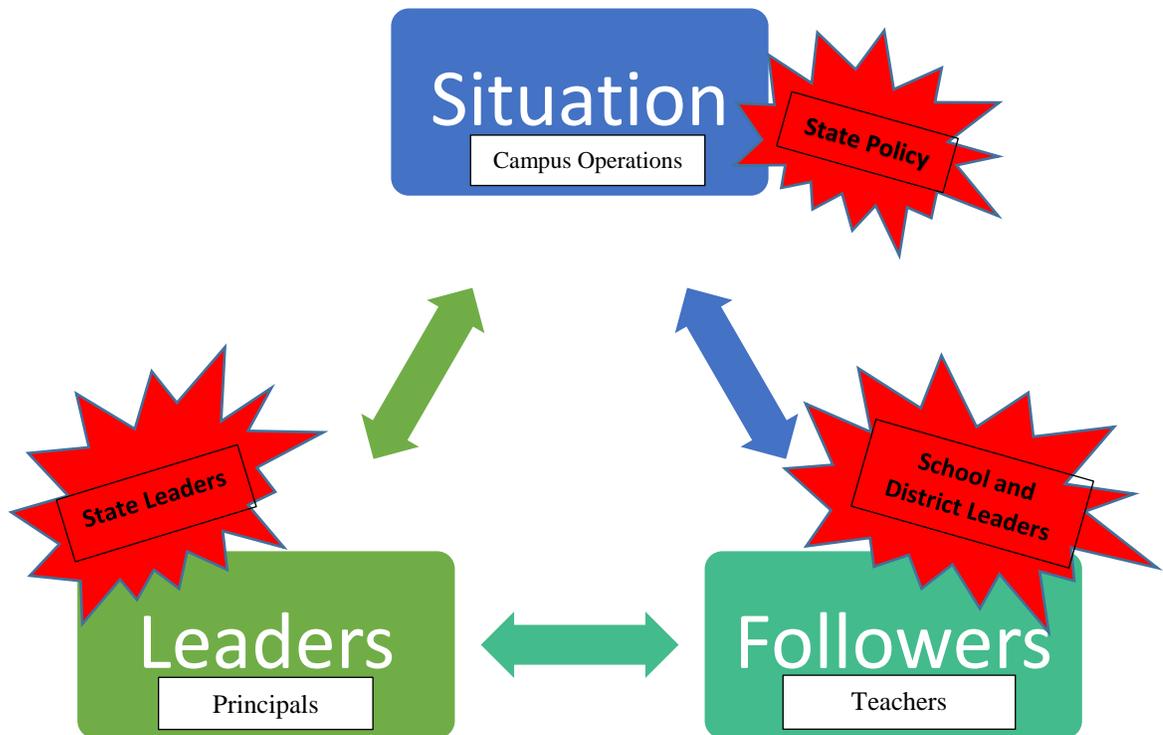


Figure 6. Combined theoretical framework of DLS (Spillane et al., 2004) with state-level application.

APPENDIX



INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Proposed Study Title: I Have a Voice so Listen: Principal Perception of the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS)

Principal Investigator: Shannon Luis Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa Martinez

Sponsor: N/A

Investigator will collect consent forms.

Sample for interview:

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.”

“The purpose of the interview today is to gain your perception on the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). In order to do that, I want to hear from you, as active participants in the school improvement process in Texas (TAIS). As the principal of a campus that went through the process, you have a unique perspective that will serve to inform my research.”

“I’d like to remind you that to protect the privacy of interview participants, all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms.”

“The interview will last about 30-60 minutes. I will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately.”

“Do you have any questions for us before we begin?”

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, including your administrative experience.

Probe: And your experience at this campus?

2. What has been the history of the school, to your knowledge, in regards to academic performance?

Probe: What would you say have been challenges/celebrations at the campus?

Probe: What do you feel led to the IR rating?

3. Prior to learning that the campus was Improvement Required (IR), what did you know about the TAIS process?

Probe: How did you know/where did you learn about it?

4. Once you knew you were entering the TAIS process and that, as the principal, you were going to be leading the Campus Leadership Team (CLT), what happened next?

Probe: Can you describe the process/next steps for me?

5. What supports did you have from outside entities?

Probe: From Central Office (DCSI)?

Probe: From your PSP?

6. What types of accountability/reporting were built into the TAIS process?

Probe: Can you describe how the data was gathered/reported during the process?

7. What do you see as the role of the Principal in the TAIS process?

Probe: How do you think the Principal's reaction to the process impacts the results of the process?

8. What would you say "worked" in regards to the TAIS process? What "did not work"?

Probe: How do you think this effected the outcome of the process?

9. How would you describe your experience being a principal at a school undergoing the TAIS process?

Probe: What lessons learned would you want to share with other principals?

10. What change to the process would you like to see that could possibly have greater impact on student outcomes that you would like to share with the TEA, if you could?

Probe: How could voices better be heard in making these changes?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add as we close?

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