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Understanding Public K-12 Building Principals’ Perspectives on the
Greatest Successes and Challenges in American Education

Buck Ekstrom

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Scott Ferrin, Chair
Bryan Bowles
A. LeGrand Richards
Michael Owens

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Understanding Public K-12 Building Principals’ Perspectives on the Greatest Successes and Challenges in American Education

Buck Ekstrom
Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations, BYU
Doctor of Education

This qualitative study was conducted in a suburban intermountain school district. The research purpose was to (a) solicit narratives from principals about the greatest successes and challenges in American education; (b) conduct deep insightful analysis to find emerging themes from the interviews with principals; and (c) to provide important information for policy and law makers.

The findings focused on data collected from interviews asking 25 principals to share perspectives and examples from their work in schools and education in general. The principals were asked about educational successes. Those cited regularly highlighted positive cultures, doing tremendous work with minimal funding, and recent academic achievements (not necessarily high test scores). Commonly mentioned challenges were low family commitment to education, low funding, and recruitment of teachers. Additionally, these building level principals thanked their legislature for supporting schools. The findings have powerful implications for policy and law makers. This study also calls on national pollsters to conduct frequent national surveys of principals.

Keywords: attitudes, opinions, surveys, challenges, successes, principals, legislature
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Being accepted into BYU’s Ed.D Educational Leadership program was an exciting adventure and the most valuable formal education I have received. The inspiration of family, friends, and colleagues made the journey gratifying.

I am eternally indebted to my mother Dorothy and grandfather Harold for your excellent examples. You taught me to work hard, live with integrity, and to simply - be good. Although neither of you obtained a college degree you both stressed the importance of getting as much education as possible. While you have both passed to the next life the seeds you planted in my heart are fluorishing.

Next, I am appreciative to my father Jake and uncles Tom and Bill for nudging me along every time we talked. Your own achievements and frequent phone calls provided consistent gentle pressure. I needed that.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Scott Ferrin, Dr. Bryan Bowles, and Dr. Steve Hite your profound advice and positive encouragement ameliorated the dissertation writing process. Your belief in me was real. Likewise, to the other members of my committee, Dr. LeGrand Richards and Dr. Michael Owens I am thankful for your candid critical direction.

My editor Lori Hawthorne, your writing expertise has been invaluable. I hope to be as smart as you one day. Also, many friends and colleagues, I thank you. You have encouraged, loved, and challenged me for many years. I treasure our association.

Finally, I express immense gratitude to those who embrace the monumental role as school leaders, including those enthusiastic participants in this study. I stand and salute you!
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DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

This manuscript is presented in the format of a hybrid dissertation. The hybrid format focuses on producing a journal-ready manuscript which is considered by the dissertation committee to be ready for submission for publication. Therefore, this dissertation does not have chapters in the traditional dissertation format. The manuscript focuses on the presentation of the scholarly article. This hybrid dissertation also includes appended materials. Appendix A contains an expanded literature review, and Appendix B presents an expanded methods section. Appendix C includes research instruments, and Appendix D provides evidence of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Appendix E lists open coding structure and themes, and Appendix F contains axial coding themes. Appendix G includes tables of selective coding.

This hybrid dissertation format consists of two reference lists. The first reference list presents references for citations included in the journal-ready article. The second reference list contains references for all citations used in the journal article and appendices.

The intended target for submission is the NASSP Bulletin, the award-winning definitive source of research for the National Association of Secondary School Principals which has a research impact score of 0.67. As stated on the SAGE journals/NASSP publication website, the “NASSP Bulletin is a peer-reviewed journal that contributes scholarly and research-based knowledge which informs practice, supports data-driven decisions, and advances the vision and performance of middle-level and high school principals. NASSP Bulletin articles are timely and professionally thought provoking, and they emphasize effective administration and leadership in middle-level and secondary schools.”

The Peer-Review Process on their website states: Manuscripts submitted to NASSP Bulletin undergo three major stages of review:
1. Editorial review by staff editors to assess the appropriateness of the manuscript for the journal.

2. Peer review by two or more members of the editorial board of the journal who are recognized scholars and experts in the area or content of the manuscript; and

3. Final editor review to determine the suitability of the manuscript for publication based upon peer review.
Background

One day seven blind mice were surprised to find a strange Something by their pond. Frightened they all rushed home. One by one they revisited the Something and felt a different part. They came back and discussed what they thought it was, a pilar, a snake, a spear, a great cliff, a fan, and a rope. Their differing views caused an argument, each thinking their own opinion was correct. (Young, 1992, p. X)

In Young’s youthful story each mouse views a large Something (an elephant) from their limited perspective. The first blind mouse bumped into the leg and thought it was a pillar, the second blind mouse experienced the trunk and thought it was a snake, etc. It was not until the seventh mouse explored the entire Something that it discovered it was an elephant.

The story of the seven blind mice is much like our current policy making situation. The valuable consistent information that is found in the literature came from a few limited perspectives. To obtain a more complete picture the voices of the principal—an overlooked perspective—are needed. This will allow policymakers to understand the entire educational elephant, resulting in better educational policy. Policymakers currently look at only a few parts of the whole elephant. The same is true of the national surveys that attempt to uncover the conditions of schools and educational institutions in America. For example, the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup poll has surveyed citizens since 1969 and educators six of those years. But they have left out a critical voice—the voice of the principal.

According to Phi Delta Kappa (2020), “The PDK poll is the most trusted source of public opinion about K-12 education.” It is a yearly national survey that includes public, teacher, and student voices. The poll is designed to elicit the current conditions in American schools so that policymakers and public-school educators can better serve their students and communities (Phi
The problem is they do not specifically include the principal’s voice. Certainly, the public opinion polls could include some principals in their random selection of citizens, but how can we assume these polls are specific enough to flesh out the specific perspective of principals? The researchers in this study argue that national pollsters have consistently left out this critical perspective.

Kate Rousmaniere (2013), in the opening pages of her book, *The Principal’s Office, A Social History of the American School Principal*, points out that principal opinions have been understudied:

As a historian, I was also struck by the absence of studies of the principalship…historians had only a sketchy understanding of the role and exhibited very little interest in understanding more. One reason for the great lacunae of historical research on the principal is that educational historians in the past 50 years tended to focus on either institutional and policy history at the central office level or on the social history of teachers, students, and communities. Principals fell through the middle, seemingly neither players in policy development nor in the day-to-day life of the classroom… principals appeared as one-dimensional functionaries, white men in dull-colored baggy suits. (p. 1)

It is unfortunate that principals have not been asked about their opinions as often as the public’s. Pollsters have focused on public perceptions. The United States citizens have an uncommon mindset; they believe the people are the experts. Education in the United States is entirely unique from any other system in the world (Goldin, 1999; Janak, 2019), because it was the American colonies who created the first publicly funded, universally accessible education system for children regardless of educational background, learning ability, or ability to pay. A system of this type existed nowhere else in the world. And since it is publicly based, publicly
owned, and a publicly funded universal system, it makes sense that researchers would ask the public what they think about public education (Goldin, 1999; Janak, 2019).

This is precisely what the PDK/Gallup poll has done for the past 51 years: surveyed the public (Gallup, 2020). Other stakeholders’ opinions have recently emerged as important, specifically the classroom teacher and student (Gallup 1984; Gallup 2017a; Gallup, 2017b). It makes sense to survey teachers, because research shows that their impact on a child’s academic performance is the most important school factor. Professor John Hattie found that teachers were the primary factor influencing student success (Hattie & Zierer, 2019). They are number one, not the age of the building, not the number and quality of textbooks, not the amount of technology, nor the size or quality of the playground; teacher quality is what really matters. But whose voice is relatively overlooked? The principal—the second most important school factor affecting student academic success (Fullan, 2014; Fullan, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Although principals have been interviewed throughout the past several decades about specific topics, they have seldom been interviewed using open-ended questions (Honig, 2006). This lack of deep thinking and insightful views of principals is problematic because they occupy key roles in schools as the boundary spanners. Surveying principals is vital to genuinely understand the current conditions in schools.

Why is the principal important? Because the principal has a unique voice. The principal stands at the nexus of all the stakeholders that support schools. The principal is the primary boundary spanner who is the gatekeeper to the work done in schools. They span the physical and virtual boundary of the school (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). They span the boundaries with teachers to parents, children to teachers, children to parents, district office to all of those, and school to the community environment (Bradshaw, 1999).
Standing at the center of the school network provides principals with a plethora of relevant information. Principals allow the flow of information to and from multiple stakeholders like the legislature, school board, civic officials, district office, parents, teachers, students, media, unions, businesses, and municipalities, which affords them vast knowledge. Principals as boundary spanners understand that collaboration with environmental factors is vital to school function (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) write, “effective school leaders recognize the reciprocal influences between the school and the environment are as significant as relationships within the organization to the creation and maintenance of high functioning schools” (p. 1). Qualities of principals who work across boundaries include: “networker, broker, collaborator, cupid, civic entrepreneur, boundroid, sparkplug, collabronaut, and boundary spanner” (Williams, 2002, p. 107). Boundary spanning school leaders are entrepreneurs of power that are, “sensitive to and skilled in bridging interests” (Webb, 1991, p. 231). The environment has more impact on the performance of the organization than many are willing to admit (Scott & Davis, 2016). Principals are like the seventh mouse in Young’s poem, because they interact with and discern the school community and its environment so heavily. They have a full view of the educational elephant. Therefore, pollsters need to access their perceptions regularly.

Whether it is moving to Common Core, conducting teacher evaluation, or using data to drive learning, principals are on the front line of implementing educational change. Fullan (2014) shares a quote from Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 5) and “…asserts, the principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning (p. 10).”

The literature does not offer a reason why principals have not been surveyed regularly, though school administrators have an abundance of experience and ideas should be tapped
(Williams, 2002). Presently, the principal’s general opinion is an understudied frontier
(Rousmaniere, 2013).

Because this critical voice is missing, and policymakers have not likely understood the
whole educational elephant, 25 principals were studied to see if their voices really were unique,
would give us additional information, or give us something new to consider. The findings were
notably interesting.

The methodology for this study will be presented first, along with an in-depth
examination of key findings. Next will be a discussion about the need to access principal voices,
and this article culminates with a conclusion advocating for pollsters to regularly survey
principals.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted
in a suburban intermountain school district. The purpose was not necessarily to generate
inferential data that would represent opinions of all principals. However, other districts could
extract valuable information and replicate these procedures for their purposes.

This type of study is situated in opposition to other traditional research methods whose
main goal is to produce generalizable information. This method follows Kuhn’s assertion that
scientific revolutions are necessary. Researchers should not just try to solve a puzzle, but rather
think beyond what the puzzle is (Kuhn, 2012). This qualitative method was purposefully chosen
to address the specific goals of this study.

This theoretical framework is based on the idea that schools are open systems (Scott &
Davis, 2016) and principals are boundary spanners in the school (Goldring, 1990; Goldring,
1997). Open systems theory illustrates that a system (school) can have only as much variety as
its environment (Scott, 2003). From a biological perspective, “…the characteristic state of the living organism is that of an open system. A system is closed if no material enters or leaves it; it is open if there is import and export, and therefore, change of the components…” (Von Bertalanffy, 1950, p. 23). Schools are living organisms that require resources from the environment surrounding them. Principal boundary spanning includes the various techniques utilized to obtain resources for the organization from the environment. The interplay between the environment and the school perfectly exemplifies open systems theory.

This qualitative methodology explains the how and why of principal thinking whereas a quantitative method would simply show density citations without underlying understanding (Creswell, 2002). This study relied on Flick’s model for extracting episodic knowledge using personal interviews (Flick, 2018a & 2018b) by asking open-ended questions which allowed interviewees to choose their own experiences to share (Flick, 1998). This approach would allow the researchers to access personal feelings, opinions, and individual perceptions on a deep level. Additionally, the potential for group influence that is often found in focus groups was eliminated. Perhaps the most important advantage this approach is that a “human quality” can be added to impersonal data work (Flick, 2000).

Research Question

The research question that drove this research was, “When given ample time and not confined with narrow (specific to a few certain topics) interview questions by the researcher, what would principals say are the biggest successes and challenges facing public education in general and in their school?” Interactions with school principals in various settings demonstrated principals have a wealth of untapped knowledge. This led to an unrestricted exploration of the greatest strengths and challenges in education from the authentic, unconstrained principal voice.
Opinions were solicited using open-ended questions and giving principals ample reflective time so they could select their own stories (Flick, 1997, p. 77).

This research investigates principals’ free thoughts as they are given time and open reflection opportunities during inquiry that was not driven by a particular agenda (Flick, 1997). When principals are given ample reflective time and control the interview agenda through open-ended questions, they unearth the greatest successes and challenges they discern in education in general and in their school. This approach unearthed new information than more guided research previously found.

This study did not ask confining and directed questions, instead it favored open-ended questions that each principal answered. This approach allowed for the discovery of free thoughts as they were given time and open reflection opportunities during inquiry that was not driven by a particular agenda. The researcher also wanted to give principals significant control over the interview while asking some basic thought-provoking questions.

To begin the open-ended and relatively unbounded interviews, each interviewee completed a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire (American Psychological Association, 2010; Beins, 2009; National Institutes of Health, 2001) collected standard data such as age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, years as an educator, years as an assistant principal, years as a principal, level of formal education completed, level of school supervised, student count in their current school, and percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch in their current school. This approach follows the National Institutes of Health policy stating that women and minorities need to be included in research (National Institutes of Health, 2001). Next, several initial icebreaking questions were asked to help set the
atmosphere for the interview. These were followed by the central interview questions that enabled participants to reflect on their school:

1. What do you, as a principal, perceive are the greatest strengths found in public education and the school you supervise?
2. When given the same reflective time, what do you as a principal think are the greatest challenges facing public education and the school you supervise?

Sampling

Research subjects were selected from 90 possible principals working in one intermountain district’s schools (62 Primary and 28 Secondary principals) as described in Table 1. When more than three possible choices fit each category, the participants were randomly selected. When only three existed, then all of them were included. For purposes of the study, it was logistically (and financially) unfeasible to interview all K-12 traditional public-school building principals in the district.

Table 1

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level Demographics</th>
<th>Free/Reduced</th>
<th>Elementary (n=12)</th>
<th>Secondary (n=13)</th>
<th>Total (n=25)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Female (n=12)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=13)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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Twenty five principals were selected for interviews. Twelve were female, 13 were male; 12 were from elementary schools, 13 were from secondary schools; 12 work in schools with at
least 40% students of poverty, and 13 work in schools with less than 40% poverty. Additional demographic data that included age, sex, school size, experience, school level, and free/reduced percentage were collected (American Psychological Association, 2010; Beins, 2009; National Institutes of Health, 2001). Random sampling was done for all the principals who identified as Caucasian; purposeful sampling was employed so that the population included all four principals in the district who identified as Asian, Black, and/or Hispanic. These four represent both sexes, both school levels, and were all working in Title-One schools. Clearly, the sampling overrepresented the voice of ethnic minority principals, by interviewing 100% of the African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, but only 24% of the Caucasians. All principals of color were included because their voice is essential. They can act as positive role models, change agents, and may bring new misunderstood perspectives.

**Interview Timeframe and Location**

The potential principal survey subjects were contacted either via email or phone to set up an interview appointment. All interviews occurred from June 14, 2018, to August 31, 2018. All interviews occurred in person in the respective building principal’s office or school conference room.

**Implementation Research Steps and Coding Phases of Data Analysis**

Moghaddam (2006) describes the beginning coding process as “unfocused and open.” Goulding (1999) explains that open coding assists us in lysing interviews into categories to make sense of the information. Open coding represents the initial attempt to group interview statements. Dozens to hundreds of codes may appear. The researcher reviews former codes looking for themes, new codes, and comparisons. This is called a constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Moghaddam, 2006; Star, 1998) and was used in this
study. The data was entered into NVivo software (QSR International, 2020) and initially coded using full transcripts based on the ETIC coding structure that is included in Appendix E. This yielded a very simplistic coding organization to begin. The codes created were based on particular words, phrases, and concepts derived while conducting the interviews. Researchers employed open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Goulding, 1999; Moghaddam, 2006).

**Phase 1: Open Coding (Data Familiarization)**

During the open coding phase, a basic node structure was created (Goulding, 1999; Moghaddam, 2006) in NVivo for common topics that would likely appear as interview transcriptions were read. Nodes were added as additional topics arose (Creswell, 2002) (see Appendix E).

**Phase 2: Axial Coding (Theme Identification and Review)**

During the next phase of coding, general themes and patterns began to emerge. The number of nodes was reduced by combining those that were similar (Goulding, 1999). This helped to show a relationship between them (see Appendix F).

**Phase 2: Selective Coding (Theme Refinement)**

In the study several core theories (themes) emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The larger set of themes was narrowed to a “selective” few using coherent evidence that supported each theme, overlap of themes, and bifurcation into distinct themes. Additionally, during this phase the themes were clearly identified and defined (Moghaddam, 2006).

The coding employed a constant-comparative analysis approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Moghaddam, 2006; Star, 1998) throughout the process; data refinement occurred constantly during the three rounds of selective coding (Corbin &
Strauss, 2014; Moghaddam, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In round one, the codes generated in the axial coding phase were maneuvered to create more vivid theme identification. The inclusion threshold increased to 75%. This helped characterize themes that arose and made them more powerful and robust in their ability to explain phenomena. Even though a theme threshold was established, the researchers decided meaningful and important themes would be included for the reader, while indicating it as a theme below the threshold. During round two of selective coding, data was compared against the attributes: sex, level of school, ethnicity, school poverty level, years as administrator, years as teacher (American Psychological Association, 2010; Beins, 2009; National Institutes of Health, 2001). During round three, the emergent themes from round one and round two were compared against each other along with various additional attributes (Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Moghaddam, 2006; Star, 1998). Themes that surfaced through this analysis cycle which were powerfully rooted are reported below (see Appendix G).

Findings

While principals agreed with much of the data in previous polls, they had important differences: their views came from their own heuristic, they spoke differently about the legislature than did the public, and they revealed additional issues that were only minimally or not mentioned at all in the national polls.

First, principals agreed with previous polls on these five issues: funding, student behavior, pressures on schools, teachers stress, and student needs.

Agreement With Previous Polls

Funding

Seventeen principals mentioned funding and said things like, “well every time you turn around there’s a funding issue” (Participant 1) and “finances are always an issue… being able to
fund what we really need” (Participant 2). Principals agreed with the polls that funding is consistently near the top of the concerns list.

**Student Behavior**

Poor student discipline has permeated the PDK public polls since their inception. Principals in this study also expressed it as one of their biggest concerns. Participant 15 attributed much of the reason for poor student behavior to parents:

Kids are hard, but so are their parents. They accuse us of things. Parents aren’t supporting us, and they feel very entitled. They think their kid needs a certain teacher or schedule and demand that the principal gives it to them. Their kid can’t do anything wrong. Entitled parents that don’t support us send a message to their child that they can be disrespectful.

**Pressures on Schools**

An additional area that principals agreed with national polls was related to pressures that come from the legislature and the public. For example, two principals said that education had been politicized (Participants 3 & 7). Another principal highlighted the three groups his school received the most pressure from:

Principals often talk about how we, meaning principals and teachers, are going to do what is [demanded] of us by the public, by the legislature, by the district office. How are we going to help our teachers do that for their kids (Participant 20)?

**Teacher Stress**

Over the years the level of stress teachers experience seemed to remain a significant concern for the public and principals. Participant 15 summarized a common reason that she cannot recruit the best teachers:
You’re not going to get those perfect teachers right now because they know they are going to fight with parents and hard kids… the stress… there’s a lot of burnout for teachers… because they’re expected to do so much (Participant 15).

**Student Needs**

One hundred percent of the principals in this study mentioned student needs; in fact, it came up a total of 257 times. This illustrated their deep concern for all students, specifically those at-risk for dropping out of school. A principal working in a Title-One school said, “We have a high population of students that are ELL [English Language Learners]. Oh, we have a high population of poverty. We end up with homeless and foster students” (Participant 9). A fellow principal working in an economically affluent area reported, “I’m seeing more mental illness, drug abuse, and sexual activity in elementary school” (Participant 12).

**Principal Views From Their Own Heuristic**

Second, though principals agreed with much data in the polls, they each had their own heuristic. Prior to becoming a principal, these individuals were educational professionals in roles such as: teacher, school psychologist, counselor, special educator, literacy coach, etc. They had their own leadership opinions about what should happen differently in education. Three examples of principals discussing similar issues to those of the public but looking at them through their own lens are funding (class size, equity and access, resources, and salaries), pressures on schools (parental, district, large workload), and student needs (physical and emotional).

**Funding**

The researchers in this study anticipated that 100% of principals would mention something about funding (HeinOnline, 2017; Rubenstein, 2002) when asked about challenges in
education. Although funding was previously mentioned this section discusses it from the unique perspective of principals. Surprisingly, 100% of male respondents spoke about funding, while 75% of females did. The respondents discussed funding as it affects four main topics: class size, equity and access, resources, and salaries. Participant 13 praised our schools for being efficient: “Based on the number of tax dollars we actually spend we do a really good job educating students.” Another principal said, “[Our state] is really good at stretching the dollar” ( Participant 23).

**Class Size.** Principals tended to express a defeated sentiment when asked about class sizes. Every one that discussed class size implied that there were significantly too many students in each class. This is similar with teacher polls, but from a principal’s perspective they believe that we should stop fighting the class size debate (Hattie & Yates, 2014). One principal echoed that the legislature feels large class sizes are acceptable. “In [our state] we stack them deep and teach them cheap” (Participant 18). Another principal expressed despair that adequate funding might never come and the challenges that result from large classes. “I think we’ve all come to the realization that we’re never going to get the adequate funding we need, so we just have to deal with the [class] loads that we do have” (Participant 11).

**Equity and Access.** When principals identified equity and access as a challenge, they categorized these into two main groups; at-risk students not having the resources and access to the best programs, and elementary schools not being treated equitably when it comes to personnel that secondary schools receive:

Having equal opportunities for all students regardless of personal circumstances [and] personal ability…we make good progress... but we still have a long way to go. For better or worse, the opportunities that students at [my first school] had compared to kids at [my
current school] are still very different and yet I recognize we are closer together than if
you go to inner city Chicago… or L.A. (Participant 15)

Participant 4 discussed the disparity in funding between elementary and secondary schools. He
felt that high schools were treated better than primary schools when it comes to certain
resources:

Not having assistant principals full-time in every elementary. Junior and high schools
have them and obviously they have more events after school. But there’s definitely a
need for full-timers in elementary. (Participant 4)

Even more principals reported that they do not have enough resources to adequately
educate all students. With their limited resources they must prioritize how those resources are
used. They expressed a difficult time deciding between competing forces:

The high school activities association added lacrosse. The startup costs for two new
sports (boys and girls), how do we manage that? How do we fund that? How do we
balance that with the need to increase instructional technology in our schools? And how
do we find coaches and facilities for lacrosse? (Participant 5)

Others expressed how the lack of resources influences teacher retention and recruitment:
“If we had more resources in the school…we could support those good teachers. They wouldn’t
be burned out…” (Participant 22). Principal concerns also included things as wide ranging as
general financial resources to physical buildings. One principal lamented about his old building:
“Mr. Jens even said to me, [this school] looks like a meat packing plant from the outside. It
doesn’t look like a school” (Participant 13).

Salaries. Salaries was the final funding topic in which principals had a much different
spin than those found in other polls. Common statements centered on the idea that teachers need
to get paid more and we need more funding to hire more teaching assistants, tutors, counselors, and other support staff. Participant 10 said, “We have to invest in people.” Participant 2, while sharing a story about a girl that threw herself in front of a train, exclaimed, “[We] don’t have the money to… hire school level social workers!”

Notably, one principal, Participant 11, deviated from the theme that teachers need to get paid more. He astutely explained a potential problem with significantly increasing teacher wages:

[If] you start offering salaries that people want, competitive salaries… you start drawing in experts that are highly educated. There would be no [alternative licensure] program. People would show up fully endorsed and ready to go. [However,] I’ve often thought this would be the biggest dilemma… people wouldn’t be in [teaching] for the right reason. I’ve often said that educators are good people because they are in it for the right reason, not because they are trying to get wealthy. You’d have gold diggers that would be trying to get the money and we would have a hard time screening between those that wanted the money and those that wanted to influence young… minds. (Participant 11)

Pressures on Schools

A second example of principals shining their own heuristic is that of pressures applied to schools. Both male and female principals closely felt (85% and 83% respectively) that the pressures applied by the community and district were the most severe. This lack of variation held true among all demographic categories. Participant 11 said, “There are some influential members within your community that will try and influence a decision and yield power that will benefit a select group of students.” The biggest pressure that principals felt coming from the district was not an overt pressure to work harder or get the teachers performing better but was more
perceived based on the district’s lack of a concise and simplified vision. Principals expressed that there were too many initiatives, “In a sense [it’s] kind of like a tornado” (Participant 16).

The feeling that teachers have about their work was another theme that emerged. Two main divisions occurred: feeling overwhelmed with the workload and feeling overly scrutinized by parents and the media. One hundred percent of female principals reported that teachers feel overwhelmed or undervalued for their work, whereas 69% of male principals reported that their teachers are overwhelmed:

The amount that is required of teachers. What are we asking teachers to do? We hear there’s more and more being added to their plates. There’s more and more being added to all of our plates and then we hold them to this incredible standard to all do well on our standardized tests and get that grade [for] our schools. But what can we do to really support our teachers? I just want to tell everyone to stop. We just need to stop, let us all breathe, and not add one more thing. Let them be what they wanted to be, educators.

(Participant 19)

Teachers feeling overwhelmed is nothing new, but the pressure has dramatically increased in recent years. The pressures are real and felt by most teachers (Herman et al., 2020). These may be a result of the current anti-education political climate. As stated in the historical section of this article, in America the public are perceived as the experts. If educators (teachers and principals) were thought of as the experts the pressure and oversight would probably come from a different source. It would not come from politicians or citizens; it would likely come from within. As a result, being a teacher is not an attractive profession to youngsters planning their futures as it once was:
The field of education is not as palatable as it was years ago. The profession’s been scrutinized, and the expectations have risen to a level where there aren’t very many people that want to be teachers. So, we have a difficult time finding good teachers and with the rise in expectations, we don’t have the rise in compensation… [T]he profession itself has been scrutinized… the media frenzy, they’re always pointing out what a teacher’s done to a student… and not often enough do they highlight what teachers are doing great. When I was just a little girl that was the thing that everyone wanted to be. They wanted to be a teacher because they were so well respected, they had such a huge knowledge base, and only these great inspirational people got to be teachers… It doesn’t matter [now because] they are scrutinized in so many unfair ways. (Participant 23)

**Student Needs**

The third example of principals looking at things with a different paradigm was student needs. Not surprisingly principals serving in Title-One schools expressed more concern for those from low socio-economic situations with higher physical and emotional needs than those in non-Title-One schools (Moore & Kochran, 2013). Also, elementary versus secondary principals and those that had longer tenure as an administrator versus those with less than five years were more concerned with student physical needs and challenges related to poverty. For example:

Individual challenges that students have outside of school; kids that are hungry are struggling to care about quadratic equations when their stomachs are growling. They’re wondering if they’re going to get dinner or not. (Participant 21)

Principals also illuminated the mental health issues that many students cope with daily. Although a few principals not in Title-One schools mentioned anxiety as a concern, most of
those reporting anxiety, depression, or other mental health problems were from Title-One principals:

  Anxiety is the top of what kids are having to experience. Home situations... they don’t come to school with their needs met ready to learn. I’ve dealt with some really hard kids that are defiant because they don’t know how to function with the stress and anxiety that they [have]. (Participant 22)

Principals also discussed the things that schools cannot control. “You can’t control the environmental factors that students face… anything from death, drug use, and a million different things for the student themselves. Anxiety, depression, bipolar have labels in our system” (Participant 3). “Anxiety is kind of the new thing… Their brains are wired differently. Their attention spans are different. There is a lot of anxiety that didn’t exist 15 or 20 years ago” (Participant 17).

These principals, during their tenure, saw both the magnitude and number of students with anxiety issues increase dramatically. The trend seemed to be that every personal challenge children face increased. Principals saw anxiety, depression, low engagement, apathy, and chronic stress boom. “Within the next few years teachers will likely need a social work degree to accompany their teaching credential to support the emotional needs of their students” (Participant 17).

Principal Opinions of State Legislature

Third, principals shared intriguing thoughts when asked what they would say to the legislature if they had the legislators’ undivided attention for two minutes. Given the current political climate it was expected that principals would castigate and scold the legislature for not supporting and funding education, as they ought to. Instead, principals began their responses by
offering some praise and expressing their concerns with thoughtful, diplomatic, and professional comportment. The most gripping finding (although it did not meet the 75% threshold) was that many principals said they would thank the legislature for their work to fund schools. There seems to be a divide in the state where this study was conducted between the legislature and the educators, so it was surprising to hear over 50% of the participants say they would thank the legislature. Participant 7 declared, “Well first, I’d thank them for the job they’re doing so far. I know it’s a hard thing to do, especially in [our state]. I mean you can only put so much money toward education.”

Participant 13 expressed appreciation that a few education appropriation committee members visited his school a couple years ago. He said they wanted to see if districts had appropriated funds correctly:

We had all the heavy hitters… All the guys on the education appropriation committee came through last year. It was interesting… they were impressed… when they were in our building that the kids [lead the tour]. I think sometimes when [legislators] come into our buildings, they expect us to grab them by the arm and chew their ear off. They appreciated spending time directly with the kids and asking the kids what they think. That was refreshing to see them want to listen and ask the kids questions. (Participant 13)

After thanking the legislature, the principals revealed hidden frustrations about lawmakers. Principals said that educators do not feel valued when legislators make education a low priority. Valuing educators was predominantly expressed by principals wanting politicians to come visit their schools and classrooms. Principals implied this would also demonstrate a legislator’s commitment to better understand schools. Even though one principal was impressed that legislators had already visited his school, other principals said legislators ought to spend a
day in schools. The following participant said principals are not afraid to show the good and bad in schools. He implied that lawmakers need to visit so they can become better partners to find workable solutions:

I would say come and see. Come spend time in a school. I’m not implying that they don’t know what’s happening, but they make decisions that impact schools. So, take every opportunity to come be in a school. We are not afraid of our warts. You can come and say, “Wow, this concerns me.” We’d probably agree with you and then show we’re taking steps. Come get familiar with what an everyday school looks like so that that can help guide decisions. We’ll show you the good, the bad, and everything in between. But, let that experience among legislators guide the decision making rather than the complaints from people. One narrow view into what happened to one family in one public school shouldn’t guide a decision that effects all schools. That should be part of the information about a whole school vision… I try to sell them on all of the great things kids are doing, and the great things teachers are doing to help kids. But I’d say come and see for yourself. Don’t take whatever sunshine I’m [sharing] and just leave it at that. Come spend time with us. Come with our school board. Come with our superintendent. Come tell us if you have concerns; tell us and if we’re not already on it, we’ll get on it. But come see what kids are doing and what teachers are doing to help kids. (Participant 5)

In close relation to the theme of principals wanting politicians to come visit their schools was their desire for legislators to make education a high priority. Making education a priority is a sub-theme for educators wanting to be valued by the legislature. Principals gave suggestions for how the legislature could value schools. They said things like trust us to make decisions, more
funding for essential programs, reduce class size, increase salaries, reduce demands on schools, stop moving test targets, and help us get the technology that students and teachers need
(Participants 1-18, 20, & 22-25). The least mentioned and maybe the most important suggestion was for legislators to look at tax structure reforms:

I’m concerned… we have more and more people flood into the state, and we continue to have the tax structure that we have… Look, we need a strong economy. We need a strong educational system because of the businesses that are going to come in. They are going to build a whole infrastructure in [our state] and are looking for an educated workforce. So, I appreciate them acknowledging that but at the same time trying to stay on top of [tax reform] is going to be an immense challenge. (Participant 25)

Another principal explained how the legislature has robbed money from public education and put it the general fund which can then be used for things like transportation and social programs. Because of this restructuring he had to write grants to obtain necessary money previously allotted for schools:

Our legislature has changed the tax structure of our state. There used to be a dedicated school fund which they eliminated and put everything into a general fund. They went from a tiered tax system to a flat tax system. This has cost public education millions and millions of dollars over the last 20 years. I’m buying a program called Math 180; it costs $15,000. Where does that money come from? I had to write an innovated grant from the foundation. I had to match it with textbook funds, and I had a private donation for $5,000. I scoured the private bushes in order to get an effective program into our school. It doesn’t make sense to me. (Participant 8)
Here is an example of a principal using his boundary spanning skills to fund what his school needs. A good example of why legislators need to know what principals think about tax reform.

Despite expressing these frustrations all principals were optimistic in their belief that voters care deeply about their local school and will not let the legislature destroy a key foundational component of our society: public schools. For example, the citizenry nearly always supports bond elections and legislation that supports schools even if it means taxes increase.

**New Issues Uncovered**

Fourth, in addition to agreement with the polls and a slightly different view, the researchers found six new issues that were either minimally mentioned or not addressed at all in the national polls: need for a consistent vision, low family commitment to education, autonomy and authority for principals, school culture, principals relish challenges, and educational successes. New revealing information from these six issues supports the idea that we need to listen to principal perspectives in order to establish superior education policy.

**Consistent Vision**

Perhaps, the most important point these participants exposed was the idea that the United States does not have a long-term educational vision. Participant 3 ponders, “Lack of focus is just a different way of saying a lack of overarching vision.” She continues to explain the disjointed directives that principals hear: “we get so many mixed messages about what’s important. We’re all working really hard. Kids are learning and graduating but in the process it feels disjointed.” Participant 6 concludes, “it is hard to be visionary when principal autonomy is limited, and we are moved to new schools so often.” A well respected junior high principal pondered about the lack of focus:
The feeling of inconsistency... feeling like you don’t know where you’re going to be from this year to the next and what new things you’re going to be required to do. The district could move you to another school. They can tell you you’re going to be running this program the one year and then the next you’re going to be running another. They’ve got principals all over the district doing all these different things and you don’t know whether you’re coming or going sometimes. (Participant 7)

Another said, “There’s so much pushing and pulling [that] we sometimes lose focus on what we are really here for,” (Participant 19). A secondary principal in a school with a high percentage of at-risk students stated, “There’s too many [district] initiatives to help our kids… we are always trying to innovate, improve, and fix education that things don’t have time to get traction before they are thrown out and the next [shiny] thing comes along,” (Participant 14). These principals believed a common vision with supporting goals was necessary to efficiently accelerate education policy and practice.

Low Family Commitment to Education

A theme that was supported by all principals in this study was a family’s low commitment to their child’s learning. This was mentioned repeatedly by principals working in Title-One schools. Surprisingly, it was also exhibited by principals working in schools serving affluent neighborhoods. The challenge was teaching parents about the importance of education. Participants reported parents focus more on what is happening right now rather than what can happen in the future. Poverty was one of their biggest issues and children not having parents that understanding the importance of education for their children (Participants 9 & 18). Others also explained how poverty and low commitment to school resulted in poor attendance:
We have a family cultural issue where attendance is abysmal with one parent households. It’s a struggle getting kids here. This trend is getting [worse]. Kids aren’t attending and they’re not oriented towards accomplishment and doing well in school. Convincing those students and families that [school] is important is hard. Some people would [characterize this as] apathy. (Participant 2)

Strikingly, one principal said that some students from higher socio-economic families are also disengaged because their parents have them involved in too many activities. These parents believe they are helping their child but unknowingly create unnecessary stress:

Parents believe education is important, but kids are involved in so many different… extracurricular activities they can’t do their academic work. More families are taking off in the middle of the school year for trips or maybe a baseball tournament. I think that’s a challenge. (Participant 4)

These families do not represent poverty, rather they are affluent. They want their child to have every opportunity in life, so much that the children develop anxiety and chronic stress. Participant 18 explained that when he was teaching in a junior high school, a student told him that he could not do his homework because he had vocal lessons, indoor soccer practice, Boy Scouts, and was in the community play—all worthwhile activities but he did not prioritize his academics.

Participant 6 further pointed out that apathy toward education extends beyond families. It reaches into our communities and elected officials: “There’s a certain level of apathy with parents, students, and school board members. Do you realize my school board representative has never been in my building? Now he’s going to be starting a second term and has never been here. So, there’s a level of apathy even with the school board member that represents our families.”
**Principal Autonomy and Authority**

Principals are given immense responsibility for their schools. This includes obligations to ensure a safe structure, hire employees, maintain order, train staff, and engage students in learning. However, principals felt limited in their authority to enact programs they believe will benefit children. This was because the state and school board has passed restraining policy. Participant 6 felt he was not allowed to do what is best for his school. He said, “not being able to do your own thing… [or] using your skills to make your school the best it can be is a challenge. I understand we need rules and policies, but we don’t have the freedom to fully use our individual talents.”

Another aspect of principal autonomy that garnered much discussion revolved around the topic of time. Principals felt they were burdened with so many unfocused initiatives they did not having enough time to observe teachers, move people toward a common goal, and buffer their school from outside pressures and influences. One principal lamented, “We’re running around putting out fires a lot of times, but we also have to be leading out front, [and] cleaning from behind. It’s difficult at times” (Participant 20).

Principals also expressed a strong desire to lead their schools, to be free to use their skills, and creativity to move things forward. But felt they did not have the autonomy to lead their school to greatness. They said the legislature, state board of education, local school board, and district office put so many limitations on a principal’s work that they could not fully innovate in their schools (Participant 17).

**Culture**

A theme that was mentioned regularly was school culture. Stephen Stolp (1994) said that school culture was hard to define and “[t]he field of education lacks a clear and consistent
definition of school culture” (p. 1). He continued that the term had been used interchangeably with ‘climate, ethos, and saga” (p. 1). Others said school culture is nothing new, has been explored since 1932, and every school exhibits a culture that is immediately recognizable:

Students who have attended several schools can pick up the culture immediately…

[w]hen they enter the new school, they know that things are different in a positive or negative way… Staff members who walk into a new school also pick up the culture immediately. They… begin to interpret unwritten rules, unstated expectations, and underground folkways. (Deal & Peterson, 2009)

Principals in our study described school culture as school spirit, caring educators, a spirit of collaboration, dedicated professionals, high standards, and developing soft skills. Even though it is conceivable for schools to have poor school spirit, these principals all spoke of it in positive terms. Every time they mentioned their school’s spirit, they smiled. This principal expanded his explanation to include the school spirit in all the district schools—sort of a district spirit:

There’s just an evident amount of pride in the school, in the community, and among the kids. They care about their school. They care about their fellow students and that’s not to say we don’t have some of the challenges that other schools have but kids look out for other kids. They generally want to be supportive and have everybody feel good about the school they attend… [K]ids are just down to earth. They’re authentic. They work hard, and I think that’s connected to all of our schools. I think there’s that sense of community and no matter what challenges we have we recognize community. We know that kids can learn and grow and develop and we see it happen. We watch it happen in elementary schools all the way up through junior high and high school. (Participant 5)
Participant 19 illustrated the type of inviting spirit in her school that welcomes the community. She also briefly touched on a new initiative that builds school pride and a sense of family:

The school spirit here is phenomenal. Kids helping kids is the goal; we’re a family and we take care of our own. Those kinds of things. We’re opening a food pantry next year which I think will be another huge success that we have here to help support the community. Our goal is to welcome community members, families, and business leaders.

(Participant 19)

Another principal’s description spotlighted the pride that all principals feel about their school when they have sacrificed enough to feel a sense of ownership and deep investment, especially if they live within the school boundaries. Similar principals find the good and emphasize it:

This is my community. I live here. It’s always been that diamond in the rough.

[Fairweather High] is a good school. It’s always been inclusive. ‘Everybody’s somebody at [Fairweather High]’ has been the theme of our school for honestly years. (Participant 3)

Principals have a duty to create a positive culture (Borg & Riding, 1993). Principals in all demographic areas had very little variance except for school level when discussing the magnitude of this responsibility. Elementary principals by a four to one margin said their role in setting the culture of the school was a major charge. Whereas secondary principals measured it slightly less important. Participant 7 reported, “There’s nothing that replaces the culture you need…you have to build that culture.” One principal spoke about his personal struggle to create a loving culture in his school, beginning with himself:
I think it is just the culture of not caring, a lack of mindfulness or heartfulness, of reaching out. It’s kind of a me culture. I think that is the biggest thing that we all fight individually. It’s the biggest thing that the communities fight individually. [The change] starts with me. (Participant 20)

All principals indicated that building culture was a serious responsibility. They discussed culture throughout each interview when telling stories about both challenges and successes. Poor school culture significantly contributed to their feeling a “heavy load.” And principals proclaimed a happy school culture was a sizable accomplishment. Whether they were talking about successes or challenges, culture was a central theme and weighed heavily on their minds.

**Relish Challenges**

About 40% of the principals struggled to define the word challenge and most took reflective time before trying. It was ironic that a question asking principals to define the term “challenge” was so challenging. Most of the principals that struggled to define challenge referred to problems in their own school to illustrate what a challenge was rather offering a dictionary definition. They said a challenge was something to overcome, stands in your way, or prevents you from reaching your goals. “It is the obstacle, and I use those terms interchangeably: challenge, obstacle, problem, dilemma. It’s the obstacle that gets in the way [of] what I picture as a perfect educational setting” (Participant 11).

The other 60% defined a challenge in more general terms and something positive to be embraced, celebrated, and an opportunity to improve. Interestingly, most of these principals were optimistic and seemed to thrive on challenges. It would be interesting to see how educators in general feel about challenges. Perhaps, principals attain their positions as building leaders because they relish a good challenge (Participant 25). Participant 18 said, “A challenge could be
something that’s wonderful… something we’re going to accomplish. This is where we’re going forward.” Participant 25 continued to define challenges in a positive way:

Opportunity—Every challenge in this job is an opportunity for growth. An opportunity for improvement. An opportunity for success. I don’t feel like we would be in the positions that we are if we didn’t thrive on a challenge. (Participant 25)

One principal took a more pessimistic or fixed mindset approach and defined challenges as “something that principals can’t change,” (Participant 23). She further explained that society needs to do the changing because schools are simply a reflection of societal morals and norms.

Principals also offered some methods to handle or deal with challenges that demonstrate their growth mindset and determination. These traits seemed permeate within these principals. They said things like, “think outside the box,” “face it head on,” “set goals,” “have clear targets,” “build a plan,” and “work and maybe change your perspective” (Participants 2, 6, and 13). “If you… know your end goal, it doesn’t matter what the roadblock is, you’re going to find a way around the roadblock to get to that goal” (Participant 24).

Asking principals to define the term challenge was a curious venture. Some struggled to find a suitable definition, others did not. All but one seemed to think of challenges as occasions to flourish.

**Principals Highlight Successes**

When principals were asked to comment on the biggest successes in education and then to highlight their school, they had much to say. The school district in which this study took place had emphasized their high graduation rates and suggested that the quality of leaders and teachers they employ were key characteristics to their success. Despite this, several expected themes did
not meet the threshold to be considered. They were graduation rates, employing caring professionals, and leadership quality.

However, four other themes did emerge: academic success and results, culture and quality of school, and good programs with high standards. Another theme, success with new initiatives, seemed to be influenced by all three themes mentioned above. “[We] starting the Ron Clark Academy, teachers are excited, with excitement brings good attitude. With good attitude in your work energizes the kids. Things like that will help implement change and improvement” (Participant 4). A principal working in a junior high alluded that his school community has a strong culture that leads to academic improvement, “Students are receiving the education we expect [for] them… I attribute that to hard working professionals but also the community that values education, good behavior, and learning. [Parents] encourage their children to school, behave, do [their] best to learn (Participant 1).

One principal talked about his recent academic improvements which were not necessarily test scores. He identified what he felt were more important skills:

Not how are the numbers going to look for the school? Not how are they going to test?
But how are they going to be better citizens? How are they going to be more knowledgeable? How are they going to have the skills they… need to succeed in the future? (Participant 7)

Next, 100% of principals shared that their school had a great staff culture. The teachers loved and supported each other. This seemed to be something principals made important to acquire and were proud to achieve. District leadership had emphasized building strong school cultures:
Our school has an outstanding staff. They are a super committed group of individuals. They work tirelessly… Whatever they can do to reach this kid to help them make growth and celebrate success. They don’t run out of ideas, they’ll research what they need to, they’ll talk to each other, they’ll collaborate, and they’ll trade kids. We have a little second grader that has some behavior challenges every now and then. When he has a great day, he goes down into a fifth-grade classroom and tells them he had a great day. They all cheer for him. It was [arranged by] the two teachers to help and support this student. (Participant 12)

Another important success that cannot be easily quantified but was an important aspect of school success shared by just over 50% of the principals was a feeling of school spirit. It is not easy to see this reflected in quantitative data, but these principals expressed their school spirit in a way that seemed tangible. The community could feel it, the students could feel it, and the staff knew it was present: “The best thing I can ever be told is [to hear] a parent or kid say they love being here. They like to come to school. That is awesome! So that’s success for us” (Participants 2). Another participant shared the following:

But if you ask [students], they will say they want to come back because the way it felt here. They may not have broken the poverty cycle, but they’ve broken some of those stereotypical things that come with poverty. (Participant 16)

All high school principals listed successes of quality programs, the variety of classes, and various opportunities for children. 100% of newer elementary principals (< 5 years) and 65% of veteran elementary principals felt that their school had good programs with high standards. This may indicate veteran principals have a better idea of what good programs and high standards
really look like, but also slightly pessimistic. Or it may imply newer principals are more
generous and optimistic about their school.

Principals, when asked about greatest successes, said their new initiatives had been successful. Ironically, when asked about their greatest challenges, respondents pointed to apathetic teachers that did not participate fully with new initiatives. Getting resistant teachers on board seemed difficult. When principals were able to convince resistant teachers to engage in new initiatives, they felt tremendously successful. Interviews also indicated that many principals were able to get new initiatives implemented despite having some resistant and grumbling teachers that refused to cooperate. All the principals that mentioned new initiatives as a greatest success also felt their new initiatives were unifying for the school and helped to strengthen school culture:

I saw huge [growth] with the use of technology as a tool. Not as the end all be all, but as a tool for some of our teachers. I saw… people pulling together around technology. Teachers had the technology vision, parents were in, and kids love it. It has the potential to do some unifying. We made a lot of progress. (Participant 15)

There were a few successes mentioned that did not rise above our threshold theme of 75% but seemed important upon reflection. Even though funding was not a central theme for successes, one principal was pleased with how the state Trustland funds have increased over time. He stated that in 1998 his school received $8,000 and in 2018 his school received over $100,000. He felt the fund managers should receive a pay raise for doing excellent work (Participant 11). Another commented on how many good things schools do with such low funding: “We are incredibly efficient when talking about the low amount of money we receive… But I feel like based on the number of tax dollars we get, we do a really good job educating
students,” (Participant 25). He criticized the legislature for underfunding schools while at the same time trumpeting his own efficiency with which schools operate.

**Discussion**

At the outset of this study, it was predicted that principals would mention funding, student discipline, and demanding parents as their most common challenges. As analysis progressed, additional striking patterns were found that joined the list of most frequently mentioned challenges: a national vision is needed, low family commitment to education, principals need autonomy, school culture, principals thrive on challenges, and they highlighted many successes.

Principals were asked to explain what they would say if they had the undivided attention of the legislature for a few minutes. Surprisingly, principals were happy to thank the legislature for their work and efforts to support education. Principals would be expected to relish the opportunity to criticize and identify nefarious veiled efforts made by elected officials to allocate minute amounts of money for schools. Instead, they thanked the legislature for the positive things they did to sustain education; a stunningly positive approach to begin a policy conversation. This indicates that principals have the correct demeanor and approach to influence policymakers. Hopefully, this will not only inspire the 25 principals involved in this study but also thousands more to engage policymakers with an organized measured plan. The participating principals in this study were thrilled to share their viewpoint when asked. That is the problem: they are happy to share their ideas, opinions, experiences, and suggestions when asked, but as the review of the literature illustrated, they have not been sought out by pollsters, legislators, or policymakers often enough. Certainly, they have not been afforded a forum to share their unrestrained thoughts. Nor have principals actively asserted their opinions in meaningful ways.
Principals cannot control federal, state, or district policymakers, but they can certainly be a more powerful influence by making their voices heard. Experience has shown that government officials often create legislation based on a few anecdotal stories from a minority of constituents or national polls. Principals’ voices are important enough to understand that pollsters ought to conduct frequent national surveys of school leaders.

Historically, principals have been reactionary and quietly defensive toward policies that were neither efficient nor effective. They ought to be more proactive and vociferous in driving the policy-making narrative. They are tough, are masters at protecting and buffering the outside influences that can wreak havoc in schools, and they clearly understand the complete educational elephant. However, their voices are relatively silent in part because policymakers have not regularly requested their viewpoints. This will not change on its own. School building administrator voices must be known by pollsters organizing and intentionally engaging principals by conducting frequent national surveys.

From this study a more complete picture of the entire elephant emerged. Missing elements that had not been considered because the voice of the principal had been neglected. This study advocates for additional research to look at a broader view of principals across the nation, so that when legislators are making policy they can pass laws based on a more robust understanding of the whole educational elephant.

Conclusion

This study occurred in only one school district but found enough rich information that it is certain we need to mine principal opinions consistently across the nation. Perhaps, national pollsters, like the National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of
Elementary School Principals, or PDK and Gallup will be convinced to partner and create a frequent national survey to obtain the opinions of those with a central perspective—principals.

In the story about the seven blind mice, the final mouse explored the entire *Something* and could see it was an elephant. Principals are like the seventh mouse because they have a comprehensive understanding of the *educational elephant*. Young’s final statement in the story summarizes why we need to include principals’ voices when making policy, “Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole” (Young, 1992, p. 38).
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APPENDIX A

Extended Literature Review

To understand the value of a principal’s perspective it is important to chronicle the historical roots and early evolution of their role. Appendix A is a historical look at education and the inception of a person taking the role of school leader, the boundary spanning roles of the leader, and the value of their perspective. These help situate the circumstances in which principals operate and add evidence for why we need to unearth their perspectives, especially when creating policy and law. This appendix then also highlights the history of the Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup public polls, PDK/Gallup teacher polls, and the research asking principals to share their professional opinions.

History of the Schools and the Principalship

Colonial America

Schools had surfaced in colonial America long before laws requiring their existence. Since the emergence of schooling, a person in charge of the school existed. Often this person was the teacher or a head teacher. The term principal soon appeared and referred to the principal teacher (Gould, 1904). Similarly, in an orchestra the principal violinist is the best violinist. In 1635, only five years after the Puritan’s settled New England the Boston Latin School was established (Parker & Parker, 2006). The voters of Boston agreed to use rents collected on neighboring islands to hire a schoolmaster and fund a school. One of these famous early schoolmasters was a Puritan, Ezekiel Cheever (1614-1708). For the next 33 years he moved all over New England working in various types of schools (Gould, 1904). Eventually, returning to Boston to become the headmaster of the well-known Boston Latin School—the oldest public school still in operation (Butterfield, 1985; Rexine, 1987). Despite the low job stability for
teachers and headmasters in the colonies, Cheever remained employed at this school for 30 years until his death in 1708 (Gould, 1904). His work in the school proved invaluable to the fledgling colony. Cotton Mather and Judge Sewall were two of many of his pupils who became leading political and influential academic figures (Mather, 1889). Cheever also laid the groundwork for some of the Founding Fathers such as Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams (Parker & Parker, 2006).

Several other towns—Charleston (in 1636), Salem (in 1937), and Dorchester (in 1938)—followed the example of Boston and voted to fund schools and hire headmasters. These were the first cobbles laid on the path to nation-wide publicly funded schools. The next school was established by the Massachusetts Act of 1642 (Barger, 2004). This Act came about because the Puritan leaders feared that parents were not in good faith teaching their children, as they “should” (Mass Moments, 2020). It required parents to provide a basic education including religious principles, literacy, and numeracy. The law was important to the colonialists for two reasons. First, they came to the New World to escape religious persecution. Fresh in their minds was the religious oppression caused by religious leaders in the Old World. Because of the colonist’s illiteracy they were entirely dependent on scribes and scholars to interpret written texts of scripture. The colonists opposed giving up control and believed that the only way to overcome their oppressors was to become literate so they could read the Bible themselves. Children needed to learn to read so that they could receive salvation (Mass Moments, 2020). Also, the colonists wanted to understand the secular and religious civil codes to which they were subjected to. This law did not establish schools, rather it codified that parents and masters needed to be the educators of their children. The stated penalty for not educating children was the removal of the
children from the family and placing them in another location—even though such locations were not yet determined (Rothman, 2017).

**Ye Old Deluder Satan Act**

Just 17 years after the Puritans landed the “Old Deluder Satan Act,” (Constitution Society, 2017; New England Historical Society, 2018) passed because parents and masters were neglecting their duty to teach their children to read. The Act stated that the main reason to teach reading was to overcome the influences of the old deluder:

> It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times by persuading from the use of tongues, so that at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted with false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers; and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, in church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors. (Constitution Society, 2017)

This Law required Massachusetts towns of at least 50 households to appoint a town teacher. The General Court prescribed that towns with at least 100 households were required to create a school for all the children in the town including both a reading and grammar school. This is one of the first documented examples of publicly funded universal education, in the world (Constitution Society, 2017; New England Historical Society, 2018). Many argued the law slowly transferred the responsibility of education from only parents to the public. Although, these institutions were publicly funded they were not necessarily free. Families had to provide room and board for the schoolmaster, pay tuition, or bring wood for the stove. Although these schools were not compulsory it was generally understood that children should attend. Because
poor children could not pay, they learned what they could at home. Girls generally were not allowed to attend public schools until the advent of the “Dame Schools” which employed local women as teachers (Laud, 1997, p.3).

**Early Expressions of Challenges and Successes From Principals**

Cities had fines imposed upon them for not providing a school and schoolmaster. Many would rather pay the fine than go to the trouble of supporting a school, because it was more cost effective. The Court doubled penalties in 1671 and a short time later they doubled again (Hinsdale, 1898). Reluctantly more cities complied. By 1683 every town that had at least 500 families were required to, “maintain two grammar schools and two writing schools, and the penalty imposed on towns having 200 families or households that failed to comply with the requirement of the law should be £20” (Hinsdale, 1898, p.9). This led to increased numbers of public schools.

This comprehensive public education idea was philosophically different from the Puritan’s motherland, England, in which only the elite class could attend school. “Historically unprecedented, this commitment to mass public education set a landmark in world education” (Laud, 1997, p.3). Having schools in every city was an arduous undertaking. Headmasters complained because they did not have enough resources to run the school and the buildings were often less than adequate. This was likely the first report from principals expressing their opinions about challenges in schools.

**Morale Education and the Role of the Principal**

Colonialists placed a major emphasis on moral education whether the school was public or private. For example, as early as 1684, “the Hopkins Grammar School’s goals included catechizing, maintaining appropriate civility and decorum, and preparing students for public
service in the church and commonwealth” (Laud, 1997, p.3). The Northwest Ordinance of 1784 emphasized among other things the importance of education by calling for a university and citing, “religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind” (Laud, 1997, p.3). Headmasters had insightful perspectives about the methods and curriculum for teaching Puritan morals. While religion and morality were reasserted, knowledge was formalized as a key purpose for education (Mazat, 2004). Headmasters were respected in the community and often drove the academic narrative, especially when emphasizing academics. The colonists trusted school leaders and their opinions. During the beginning of the 19th century formal public education began to take a stronger hold on politics. Conservatives argued that schooling should be a way to maintain law and order, whereas liberal minds wanted schools to promote social equality. During frequent debates headmasters were prone to share their opinions. Whether or not they were listened to is undocumented. As the territory grew and immigration expanded it became increasing difficult to hold such a heterogeneous population up to high standards (Laud, 1997):

But when the increase of the colony and the downfall of King Philip removed or mitigated the immediate fear of danger, the growing population of the towns began to break ranks and scatter into the wilderness. Towns increased in number rapidly. But this was not all: the character of the towns, socially and economically began to change. The new town was not so much a body of population gathered about the meetinghouse and schoolhouse, as it was a body of population scattered over a township…We now begin to meet the “travelling” or “moving” school, which for a time gained considerable prominence, and continued to the time of Horace Mann. (Hinsdale, 1898, p.11)
Importance of the Headmaster

The headmaster was the key component for the moving or travelling school. One could say that the master teacher was the school. If he got fired or lost employment because the town did not have the means to pay him, the school often ceased. Colonial towns were very interested in promoting themselves as a great places to conduct business. Establishing a school and hiring a preceptor was a great way to market themselves. Just hiring a person and calling them a “principal” gave some stability to the school at least in the minds of the citizenry (Rousmaniere, 2007). Principals were often held in high esteem and wielded much influence in the community. The citizenry often sought their opinions on a wide array of subjects. Joseph Green Cogswell, a local principal in Massachusetts, was known as, “the organizer, manager, and father of the community… moral and affectionate influence, besides which he was head farmer, builder, gardener and treasurer of the place” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p.12). This was particularly important with communities that had open to the public, annual examinations. Positive scores meant praise for a well-managed school. Poor results often led to student withdrawals and possibly firing the principal. Effective principals had the important skills and insights that commoners lacked (Rousmaniere, 2013).

Boundary Spanning Qualities of Early Principals

Schools struggled for legitimacy in many areas and their very existence often depended completely on the charisma and leadership abilities of their founders. The founder often was also the headmaster or principal. To remain viable and popular they needed to be highly effective in many roles: community leader, disciplinarian, master teacher, fundraiser, high moral exemplar, and visionary leader. The job of principal became specialized. They usually held a central role in the community and were well respected.
Mid-19th Century Principal Role Changing

As schools became more common the need for a systematic approach increased. In the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, the principal role evolved even more as school reformers adopted the monitorial system also called the graded system, influenced by Fredrick Taylor’s, Scientific Management which streamlined factory operations. In 1847 Massachusetts established the first school to group students according to age. This added uniformity and order. The principal teacher was responsible to orchestrate the various classes, supervise teachers, and handle discipline over a more heterogeneous student body. This, helped to clarify his role in some respects (Tyack, 1974). Only 20 years later the superintendent of Boston schools appointed supervising principals who could serve as “master mind[s]” to orchestrate the many moving parts of a school and gave them the authority to “keep all subordinates in their proper place” (Katz, 1968, p. 160). This new system solved many problems in heterogeneous schools but did not address school at the community level. Each town was becoming responsible for more than a few schools. Eventually in 1876, the creation of a school district occurred when a city appointed a superintendent, a board of supervisors, and 48 principals (Rousmaniere, 2008). Control and authority began to shift away from the local school and principals lost some autonomy.

Increasingly Women Enter Teaching and Principalships

Nearing the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century woman had taken a strong hold as the nation’s teachers. For example, “By, 1888, woman constituted 63 percent of the nation’s teaching force, and over 90 percent of the urban teaching force.” (Rousmaniere, 2008, p. 21). Horace Mann in 1843 the superintendent of Boston Schools, said of female teachers, in the Sixth Annual Board Report of the Board of Education:
All those differences of organization and temperament, which individualize the sexes, point to the female as the guide and guardian of young children. She holds her commission from nature. In the well-developed female character, there is always a preponderance of affection over intellect. However powerful, and brilliant her reflective faculties may be, they are considered a deformity in her character unless over-balanced and tempered by womanly affections…. [Children] need kindness and not force, and their better instincts are to be fostered by a congenial warmth, rather than their reason to be addressed by a cold and severe logic…. They are to be gently withdrawn, rather than rudely driven, from whatever is wrong; to be won towards whatever is right more by a perception of its inherent loveliness and beauty… In the correction of children too…in rooting out an evil he may extirpate much that is benevolent and generous; It requires a gentler, a less hasty, a more forbearing nature, and a nicer delicacy of touch, so to remove the evil as not to extirpate the good. (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1843, p. 29)

During this era woman had essentially two options for employment, either become a factory worker or a teacher. Because teaching was much more prestigious it was an easy choice for women that already had an education to mold the next generation of students. School boards liked hiring woman. They were naturally affectionate, caring, committed, hardworking, of high moral character, and would often accept low pay. However, most towns and school systems required that female teachers could not be married; because a woman could not serve two masters (Katz, 1968). She had to either choose to serve a husband or her career. In the minds of many town leaders (who were men) most women could not be trusted with the education of children unless they had proper supervision by a man (Elsbree, 1939, p.201). However, by the 20th century, most grammar schools were led by women:
Between 1900 and 1950, over two-thirds of American elementary schools were led by women principals. Most of these positions were in rural schools, but women were also prominent in city schools, holding over three fourths of elementary principalships in cities under thirty thousand and well over half in many of the largest American cities. In some communities, women principals were not only numerically but culturally dominant, holding a kind of matriarchal lineage. In some Southern cities after the Civil War, the combination of the loss of so many white Southern men during the war and the expansion of public-school systems led to a significant increase in white middle-class women’s long-term employment in public schools. (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 47)

Despite this, “women were virtually excluded from the more prestigious and higher-paying secondary school principal’s office, except in all-girls’ schools” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p.50).

**20th Century Principals as Boundary Spanners**

The role continued to evolve because of new structures at the district and school levels. Principals now were placed directly between the district office and their schools. They “acted as the local implementer of the educational vision” and buffered the vision within their schools (Rousmaniere, 2013). This put them in the hub of the school system and made their perspectives invaluable. Paul Revere Pierce (1935) outlies that in Cincinnati, Ohio principals were responsible to ring the school bell, provide oversight for tests, deal with foul language from students, make assignments for the school fireplace, keep track of books, and reporting student attendance and academic success or failure (p. 27). The job description of the principal was that of manager or secretary. Although the role of principals was not clearly delineated, and superintendents and principals often battled over their respective duties. Policymakers began to neglect the voice of principals.
Often, superintendents and principals disagreed over how to discipline children. A noteworthy example is explained by John Rury (2012) in his book, *Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling*. He discussed the colonial beliefs that children need to first learn obedience, but used an extreme story to illustrate one technique:

The episode occurred when Heman was just 15 months of age (quotations are Wayland’s own). Wayland described his son as unusually “self-willed,” with a quick temper. One morning when Wayland took the boy from his nurse, Heman began to cry “violently.” Determined not to let the child have his way, Wayland held him until he stopped, and took away a piece of bread clutched in his hand. When Heman stopped crying, Wayland offered the bread, but the child threw it down. Wayland then resolved that Heman would not eat until he accepted food from his father and welcomed his affection. Moreover, he was to be restricted from contact with other members of the household. Thus, began a test of wills that would last more than 30 hours. Heman was kept in a room by himself and was only allowed food when accepting it from his father. When Heman took the bread but refused to embrace his father, the food was taken back. The boy was obstinate throughout the first day, despite Wayland’s regular visits, “every hour or two,” and his speaking “in the kindest tones.” Wayland described the boy “hiding his face in the bedclothes” and crying “most sorrowfully,” but he refused to approach or embrace his father. Finally, in the late afternoon of the second day, young Heman relented, after nearly two days without eating. In the end he “repeatedly kissed” his father and “obeyed his every command.” (p. 51)

There was general agreement that children should be disciplined with whatever means necessary but debates over how best to accomplish the goal were frequent. Since the early 1800s,
policymakers have argued over corporal punishment in schools. One school system took the opportunity to survey principals as disciplinarians. The question was, “Did children require fear to learn properly, or did such emotions make learning even more difficult to achieve” (Rury, 2004, p. 80)? This was an early example to formally seek principal perspectives. Returning to Horace Mann, when he returned from his travels to Prussia, he determined that his schools would have a more humane way of instructing (like the Prussian schools) rather than demanding rote memorization. Prussian teachers used various methods to peak student interest and avoided physical punishment and fear; they subscribed to Froebel and Pestalozzian theories. Mann loved this perspective and received much support from many stakeholders. One group that fought his ideals were the Boston school headmasters. They disagreed with Pestalozzian principles arguing that children could not learn from mere curiosity, rather they needed “focus” and “discipline” through “memorization and recitation” (Rury, 2004, p. 81). Mann responded and told the headmasters that they were acting on “base self-interest” and “defending their own privileged positions at the expense of children” (Rury, 2004, p. 81). Over the next few years, the rebuttals ricocheted between the philosophical factions, eventually leading Mann to implement standardized tests so that he could prove that the schools were failing. In this way he was able to push his agenda forward (Rury, 2004). This marked the beginning of standardized tests being used as a political tool to harm schools. Our study found that principals today also felt that standardized tests were weaponized to drive political agendas irrespective of pedagogical research and principal perspectives.

The role of principal evolved throughout the twentieth century and solidified the school leader’s position in the center of a network of several influences; citizens, businesses, politicians,
the school board, and the district office. This central role gave them a unique perspective that others in education did not fully understand.

**Boundary Spanning and Principals**

Boundary spanning is an important topic to review because many of the principal statements in our study about successes and challenges related to their boundary spanning roles. Boundary spanning of key players is one way that schools obtain resources from the environment. This implies that the school is defined by a clear boundary separating it from the environment. Two categories of boundaries exist: physical and imaginary. Imaginary boundaries can be referred to as perceived boundaries. Both types of physical and imaginary boundaries are observed in a school. For example, the school property, brick, and mortar are physical boundaries that serve to distinguish the school from the environment. A school also has a more fluid and perceived boundary defined by its mission, work, and activities. Boundaries are permeable and porous. They permit the environment to influence and shape the school, have a filtering function to control the information flow, and serve to help protect the system (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

School administrators interact with and are influenced by their school’s environment. Many try to insulate or isolate the school from the environment so that the teachers can be left alone to attend to their core function, student learning. Because of negative experience or rumors, “practicing administrators often treat external environmental factors as threats to their organization…the instinctive response of the school administrator is to buffer their core technology from disruptive influences in the environment” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p.1). The principal’s attitude about the environment has an impact on their effectiveness as a boundary spanner and leader. Comprehending school organizational boundaries and their worth
provides sovereignty and a certain amount of liberty for the school. Wise principals know that establishing “symbiotic interdependence” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003 p.1) with environmental factors through sharing information and collaboration is vital to school growth (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) because environments provide what they need to function. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) exclaim, “effective school leaders recognize the reciprocal influences between the school and the environment are as significant as relationships within the organization to the creation and maintenance of high functioning schools” (p. 1). Schools and their people are part of their environments and are interdependent with each other (Weick, 1995). However, it must be noted that not everyone is cut out to be an effective boundary spanner. To officially hold the role a careful selection process must be used to ensure that the leader has the necessary skills. Qualities of those who work across boundaries include: “networker, broker, collaborator, cupid, civic entrepreneur, boundroid, sparkplug, collabronaut, and boundary spanner” (Williams, 2002, p. 107). Boundary spanning leaders need to be entrepreneurs of power that are, “sensitive to and skilled in bridging interests” (Webb, 1991, p. 231). The environment has more impact on the performance of the organization than many are willing to admit (Scott, 2016).

Because principals are key boundary spanners for their schools they hold a distinct perspective that can add rich insight for anyone seeking to truly understand what happens in schools. Principals experience and comprehend the forces that apply pressures to schools and know the best ways to mitigate those influences. This is one reason why their opinions are invaluable.
**Open Systems Theory**

Viewing public schools as open systems is important to understanding the circumstances in which principals will share their opinions. Many of the things they say are better discerned when we understand open systems theory and boundary spanning concepts.

Open systems theory believes that a system (school) can only have as much variety as the environment (Scott, 2003). From a biological or physics perspective, “…the characteristic state of the living organism is that of an open system. A system is closed if no material enters or leaves it; it is open if there is import and export, and therefore, change of the components. Living systems are open systems…” (Von Bertalanffy, 1950, p. 23). Schools are living organisms that require resources from the environment surrounding them. Principal boundary spanning includes the various techniques utilized to obtain resources for the organization from the environment. The interplay between the environment and the school perfectly exemplifies open systems theory. Some school administrators attempt to shield or safeguard (buffer) their schools from the outside world. A truly open system does not have to protect itself from the environment, rather depends on and thrives because of the environment (Hardy, 1983, p. 340).

Principals are the key boundary spanners in schools, although teachers and students often serve this function in informal ways. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) explain, school employees influence the “constraints and opportunities” of the environment that is outside the boundary even though they are not official boundary spanners. Aldrich (1999) explains that [schools] are filled with employees who are limited by bounded rationality and influenced by prejudiced information and social pressures. Therefore, it is important to carefully select a highly skilled and knowledgeable leader to be the official boundary spanner in a school. Once selected this boundary spanner needs to have the freedom and to act on his judgement, instinct, and
experience. Additionally, this person needs to have solid leadership abilities to enact their strategies (Senge, 2000).

**Sparse Research**

Boundary spanning research with reference to education and principals is relatively sparse. The research conducted relates to district level officials rather than principals (Honig, 2006). Williams states “the literature on boundary spanners is by no means extensive or consolidated” (2002, p. 109). Principals must understand their role as boundary spanners so that they can be effective at two things: getting essential resources for their school and reducing uncertainty. Leadbeater and Goss believe boundary spanners, or “civic entrepreneurs” are those that are “restless, creative, lateral think[ers] rule breakers. They are frequent storytellers and risk takers, who combine a capacity for visionary thinking with an appetite for opportunism” (1998, p. 17). By engaging constructively in these activities, the boundary spanner (principal) helps to legitimize their school and thus perpetuate its existence (DiPaola, 2003).

To define their role, boundary spanners must clearly see the environment, understand boundary spanning strategies, and comprehend the open system in which they lead. Principals manage the permeability of the boundary but have less control over this than many other organizations (Goldring, 1990; Scott & Davis, 2016). For instance, principals cannot control parents from coming into the school and trying to influence policy.

Open systems have a certain amount of dependency on the environment for their resources (Scott & Davis, 2016). This creates tension inside the organization. The boundary spanner works to reduce this tension by employing macro and micro strategies.
**Macro Level Boundary Spanning**

At the macro level boundary spanners must perceive the environmental map of the organization by understanding the boundary location and characteristics (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). This means knowledge of external factors that affect the organization in general (occasional interaction: businesses, city government, and military) and specific (consistent interactions: parents, district office, and state agencies) terms. Boundary spanners must also understand the external attributes of the environment that flow through the boundary. Four types of attributes are identified: volatility, capacity, clustering, and complexity. The amount of each of these that an environment experiences directly influences the uncertainty and dependency of the organization. Volatility is the stability of the elements. Capacity indicates the amount and type of resources available from the environment. Clustering refers to the level that environmental elements are organized. And complexity refers to the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the elements (Goldring, 1995, p. 293).

Uncertainty and environmental dependency are indicated by the levels of the four attributes mentioned above. Uncertainty is defined by Goldring (1995, p. 290) as a lack of information about future events or lack of information needed to perform required tasks. Dependence is defined as, “the extent to which the focal organization depends on environmental elements or constituencies (Goldring, 1995, p. 292). Principals must try to control dependency and uncertainty as much as possible. When circumstances are certain, principals can act efficiently because the organization is calm. When uncertainty is high, the principal must use time and energy to minimize sources of uncertainty. Leaders must understand how environmental elements are changing, how the changes will impact the school, and how to act effectively to the changes (Goldring, 1995, p. 290). Johnson and Fauske (2000) discern that
Principals must keep an eye to environment changes and must predict future opportunities and threats. Uncertainty is also reduced when organizations have an abundant supply of resources from many different locations. When uncertainty and dependence on the environment are both high the principal can use adaptive strategies to mitigate negative impacts to the school; strategies like better communication, smooth cooperation, and decentralization (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1986).

Principals reduce dependency by employing several strategies. First, they can generate competition between resource suppliers by having many of them. Second, boundary spanners use public relations to control environmental perceptions about the school to gain prestige. Third, bridging strategies can be used to build trust in the school/environment relationship (Goldring, 1995, p. 294). When principals use bridging to increase parental activity, academic achievement increases. Griffith (1996, 2001) cited several studies (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Reynolds, 1992; Stevenson & Baker, 1987) showing that enhanced parental involvement resulted in higher student achievement. Griffith fairly cites others (Dwyer & Hecht, 1992; Medland, 1977) that showed no direct positive or negative effect. Reynolds concludes that parental support is not predictive of student success in all situations (1992). It is intuitive to most educators that high parent participation is often associated with high income neighborhoods that have more college educated citizens. This research is inconclusive whether increasing parent participation in poverty schools will also increase student success. However, principals and teachers “know” that parents are vital to learning and will still try to bridge with them. Citing Henderson and Mapp (2002, p. 24), DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 51 studies and found there exists a “positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits to students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across
families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students of all ages.”

And fourth, buffering is used to control as many outside influences as possible, often by implementing regulations. “Buffering might include principals’ insistence that community groups, social service agencies, and businesses, or parents make their initial contact with them rather than with teachers” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p. 63-64). Interestingly, research conducted by Hoy and his associates indicates that schools with high levels of environmental intrusion tended to achieve more, whereas schools that successfully buffered these influences scored lower (Hoy et al., 1991). DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran (2003) continue to quote Hoy, “…in some cases in which teachers perceived greater intrusiveness from parents and other members of the community, student achievement tended to be higher” (p.63-64). This would indicate that some pressure from the environment is good for schools (Hoy et al., 1991).

Four additional strategies to effectively reduce dependency are co-optation, contracting, cooperation, and coalition building. In co-optation the organization allows some element of the environment within its borders. Contracting is using agreements with the environment to reduce uncertainty by solidifying its based for resource acquisition. For example, contracting with private lunch providers provides certainty that food will be present. Next, cooperation (also called coalition building) between the organization and the environment helps the school to adapt to its environment easier (Goldring, 1995). These are used when elements in the environment and the school have identical or similar vision and goals. The boundary spanners use these commonalities to build a common vision or purpose. Sometimes the principals build bridges with those that have conflicting goals. Those skilled in persuasive coalition building bring such antagonists into their realm to garner support for the school’s mission. Successful coalition
builders obtain valuable information, giving them legitimacy and credibility to help them progress the schools mission (Williams, 2002).

**Micro Level Boundary Spanning**

Micro level boundary spanning requires the boundary spanner to interpret and define the environment so that the organization can clearly understand the environmental elements. Boundary spanners must see their environments as understandable otherwise uncertainty will abound. Productive leaders see criticism from their environments as opportunities to grow and improve (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Boundary spanners can employ many strategies on the micro level to manage perceptions and information. How do boundary spanners control uncertainties by managing these two things? They use their power to limit uncertainty by controlling the information flow, which reduces stress caused by the environment. Informational intermediaries act as mutually trusted lynchpins between social groups, human catalysts can bridge and help overcome informational asymmetries, establish a common set of expectations, and facilitate goal adjustment (Ebers, 1997; Williams, 2002). Boundary spanners also control tangible and non-tangible resource, act as entrepreneurs and innovators (Dodgson, 1994), by acquiring “hard to get” resources (giving them a sense of power), controlling decision processes (putting the boundary spanner in the center of the network), and becoming leaders in the community (environment). This is all done to gain power and legitimacy. Power increases as the organization mirrors the environmental norms. By employing these strategies boundary spanners increase power for their organization. The best school leader innovators are rebels, visionary, and mavericks (Williams, 2002).

Boundary spanners must manage their environment and balance the conflict between dependency and autonomy (Williams, 2002). Dependency is important and often necessary. It is
only a problem when the dependency is unwanted and lesser than the desire for autonomy. Furthermore, reduced autonomy may be desirable if the school sees the benefit of additional resources far more important than control of any decision-making process that is coupled with those resources. However, if more autonomy is necessary the boundary spanner must seek additional sources with fewer constraints on the desired resources. In such cases the boundary spanner must work to decrease dependency and increase autonomy.

The efficacy of an individual as a boundary spanner is influenced by their personality and ability to build trust. A principal could possess a mighty entrepreneurial drive and energetic innovative spirit, but if he is uncaring and cannot be trusted cooperation from environmental factors subside. In one article, Williams (2002) quotes Webb in which he clearly proclaims, “trust is pivotal to collaboration. Attitudes of mistrust and suspicion are a primary barrier to cooperation between organizations and professional boundaries: collaborative behaviour is hardly conceivable where trusting attitudes are absent” (Webb, 1991, p. 237). Trust is more important than positional power and must be in place to reduce uncertainty (Williams, 2002).

The personal characteristics (personality) traits of superior leaders are as Koltin (2013) puts it, represented by the 10 C’s. They are competitive spirit, clutter (deal with what is important), cohesiveness, candidness, crystal-clear vision, curiosity, contagious enthusiasm, crazy, change agent, and communication. To put it another way, superior leaders are energetic, engaging, and exciting. When studying the famous educational innovators from 1830 – 1980 they all were excellent communicators:

All founders had the capacity to speak persuasively in public. There are first-hand accounts of Hahn's magnetism, Perry's conviction, Mann's eloquence, and Coady's ability to shatter complacency. Grundtvig could cast a spell over thousands at an open-air
meeting but appears to have been equally effective with Kold sitting at his feet. Mann, Coady, and Lee were similarly able to hold large audiences, but Mary Lyon and Tompkins were more comfortable and effective in small and informal settings. (Stabler, 1987, p. 277)

In summary, “The impact of the environment on schools makes it imperative that school leaders cross the organizational boundary to conduct and environmental scan for opportunities and threats” (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003, p. 64) and they do this with trust and a charismatic personality. The type of personality we need is “[the] kind of charismatic leadership [that] rejects old customs and beliefs and calls for new ways of living and thinking. The leader defies the past and demands new obligations, particularly of a small circle of disciples. They are not technically trained officials in the usual sense, but rather a communal group whose members are intensely loyal to the leader and prepared to serve him, if need be, without rank or salary” (Stabler, 1987, p. 277).

**Surveys of the Public (Phi Delta Kappa / Gallup Polls 1969 – 2019)**

Gallup has conducted surveys of public education since 1969 (Gallup, 2020). In all their surveys they have polled the general public about the state of education. Six times they specifically polled teacher and students in grades 5 – 12 were surveyed eight times (PDK Poll Topic and Archives, 2019). These were conducted to obtain insights and opinions on the state of education in America from the three groups. A glaring omission is that public school building administrators were not surveyed. No doubt local and state school boards, state legislatures, and congress have used these polling results to create and enact policy. With a thorough search of the literature, it is difficult to find many polls asking principals to share their general opinions about successes and challenges in education. There are many studies asking principals’ attitudes
regarding specific topics. For instance, one survey asked their opinions regarding mainstreaming special education students. But little has been done to find out their attitudes regarding the biggest problems and successes that they experience in schools. The purpose of this dissertation was to expand the process of exploring the attitudes of principals by asking them about the biggest problems and successes that they see in public education. This was accomplished by interviewing 25 principals in a suburban school district.

**Phi Delta Kappa**

Phi Delta Kappa (known as PDK) is an educator’s organization that has as its mission: “to grow and connect leaders in education” (PDK International, 2017). Its vision is, “To be the experts in cultivating great educators for tomorrow while continuing to ensure high-quality education for today” (PDK International, 2017, p.1). It is curious that they have not asked principals what they think.

PDK publishes a professional journal, *The Kappan* which publishes researched based articles about all major education topics ranging from practical skills to help teachers to topics that are useful for policymakers, researchers, and innovators (PDK International, 2019).

**Gallup Poll**

Wikipedia (2020) explains that Gallup Incorporated is an American research firm that is well-known for conducting opinion research polls. It was founded by George Gallup in the mid-1930s to discover the opinions of the public on a wide range of topics. Gallup was determined to remain objective and completely neutral especially when it came to politics. He refused to poll for the democratic or republican parties and other special interest groups. The Gallup poll has been widely used and respected. From 1936 until 2008 it predicted the presidential election winner except on two occasions; when Harry S. Truman defeated Thomas Dewey, and when
Jimmy Carter beat Gerald Ford. In 2012 the poll predicted a 49% to 48% victory for Mitt Romney over Barrack Obama. Obama won by 4% (Gallup Company, 2017).

Gallup conducts their polling using a predetermined panel of 100,000 persons (Gallup, 2017b). The company claims that this panel is an extremely close representation of the entire U.S. population. Members of this panel access surveys via telephone, email, or online, enabling Gallup to extract opinion information rapidly. Potential panel members are recruited using random-digit-dial (RDD) of both landline and cell phones or random address-based-sampling (ABS). The samples responses are weighted to correct for nonresponses and unequal selection probability. The company also changes the value of samples for “…gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region…” (Gallup, 2017a; Gallup, 2017b) so that they accurately reflect the U.S. population based on the most Current Population Survey (CPS) results.

The Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools

PDK and Gallup has partnered to solicit public attitudes about public schools beginning in 1969. The surveys were used to measure the opinions of American citizens toward K-12 public (traditional and charter) schools, specifically about key issues such as school safety, student discipline, funding, college and career readiness, the achievement gap, and standardized assessments. Gallup still utilizes its Gallup Panel (Gallup, 2017a) for the survey and includes about one thousand respondents. An important limitation to note is that it only surveys in English. For proper analysis of the results the poll responses are weighted to ensure that parents of school-aged children are not overrepresented. Samples are also weighted to account for other demographic categories so that they are representative of the U.S. population based on the CPS data. For the past five decades’ policymakers have used the poll to guide their planning and law-making efforts nation-wide and in local communities. More than 800 questions relating to a wide
variety of topics were utilized during the 50+ years of polling (PDK International, 2017). The reports for each annual survey had two main purposes. “First, it will alert educators and interested laymen to overall public reaction to many aspects of school programs and policies. Second, it will serve as a national benchmark against which local attitudes may be measured” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019). It should be noted that PDK encourages its members and readers of the Kappan magazine (PDK International, 2019) to conduct local surveys on a smaller scale. In 1970 they created a survey model manual that school districts could use. “The manual will suggest survey procedures useable by school personnel in developing reliable bases for decision making which are less dependent on pressure groups, telephone feedback, and random discussions with constituents that is often the case today” (PDK International, 2019, p.1).

Here is a summary of each of the main topics that have surfaced during the polls (Gallup, 2020).

**Achievement Gap (AG).** Questions inquiring about achievement gap were asked 2001 – 2012. During this period there were four main categories of questions:

1. Closing the gap addressed current funding, high standards, and importance of closing the gap.

2. What are the factors related to the AG?

3. Does the public understand the AG?

4. Who owns the responsibility for closing the AG?

During these years, the public believed that closing the achievement gap was extremely important. The public believed funding and high standards were currently adequate to close the AG. The most important factors to close the AG were the amount of parent involvement, home life, student interest, and the community environment. An overwhelming majority: 66% in 2002
to 77% in 2006 believed that factors other than school quality were the primary influence for the AG and 52% said in 2001 that government was not responsible to close the gap. However, in 2001 when the public was forced to answer which level of government should be responsible, federal, state, and local all received about 1/3 of the support. In 2001 and 2004-2006 about 56% said that schools were responsible to close the AG. Apparently, the public did not view schools as government. When asked about the most effective methods to close the AG, providing more instructional time and other help for low-performing students was most popular with 65%.

In 2003 the poll inquired about the achievement gap between higher performing Asian students and Caucasians. The same indicators to explain the achievement gap between whites, blacks, and Hispanics were cited (parent involvement, home-life/upbringing, and interest of students).

**Biggest Problems.** Every year that the PDK/Gallup poll was conducted Americans were asked about their opinions on what they believed were the biggest problems facing our schools. Data shows the most common 10 responses were:

1. Lack of financial support
2. Overcrowded schools
3. Lack of discipline, more control
4. Use of drugs/dope
5. Fighting or fighting/violence/gangs
6. Difficulty getting good teachers/quality teachers
7. Concerns about standards/quality
8. Integration/busing or integration/busing/racial discrimination.
9. Lack of parental support
10. Testing regulations

From 1969 to 1985 except for 1971, “lack of discipline, more control” was listed as the most common problem facing schools. In 1986 opinions shifted to “use of drugs/dope” as the biggest problem to be addressed. In 1992 “use of drugs/dope” tied with “lack of financial support/funding/money” as the most mentioned problems. In 1994 “lack of discipline, more control” returns as the most popular response and only changes in 2000 when “lack of financial support/funding/money” took the number one spot and remained there through 2016. Below is a summary of the nine areas individually from 1969 – 2016.

1. Lack of financial support has always been one of the top four choices with about 13% - 19% of Americans mentioning it as a problem in schools. Around the turn of the century 20% - 35% said it was a problem.

2. Overcrowded schools have consistently been identified as a problem with 5% - 10% indicating it. From 2000 to 2006 people indicating it as a concern jumped to 11% - 17%.

3. Lack of discipline/more control had about 20% respondents mention it as problem from 1969 – 2001. Then it slowly decreased until 2016 when only 9% said it was a problem.

4. Use of drugs/dope was consistently identified as a significant problem in the polling data until the late 90s when less than 10% identified it as a major concern.

5. Fighting or fighting/violence/gangs was only identified as a major concern during the 1990s.

6. Difficulty finding good teachers was a moderate concern until about 1990 and had steadily decreased. However, since 2014 this concern seemed to reemerge.
7. Concerns about standards, lack of parental support, and testing regulations were only identified as issues within the last 10 years.

8. Integration/racial discrimination was of high concern until about 1980 and steadily diminished as a concern until 1997 when it was not even mentioned. This trend remained until 2016 when 2% identified it as a concern.

9. Other concerns were addressed during polling years which are outlined below.

Choice. Gallup asked several questions about the different types of school choice options: charter, online, home, private, and public. From 2000 to 2014 support for charters grew from 42% to 70% and in 2010, 60% said they supported a large increase in the number of charters. However, in 2014 65% of respondents said they would not support charters if it meant that public schools would receive reduced funding. In the early 2000s the public stated that they were in favor of charters having the same accountability measures as public schools. In 2013 and 2014 the survey showed that 52% - 54% think students received a better education in charter versus public schools. For online charter schools the results seemed to be mixed. In 2002 65% opposed students receiving all their learning online, but by 2013 75% favored students being able to earn college credits and 56% supported high school credits being obtained online. It appeared that as time passed more citizens were coming to terms with the idea that online learning was beneficial. Although people did not want their children compelled to take online classes and certainly did not think it was in the best interest of children to take only or mostly online courses because associating with peers and teachers in face-to-face instruction was important. In 2013 three items relating to home schooled students being able to access public school service were addressed. 90% supported special education classes for handicapped children, 75% percent wanted their children to attend public schools at least part-time, and 80%
wanted their child to be able to participate in public school athletics, clubs, and after-school activities. And supermajorities thought that driver’s education and professional development courses for home schools should be publicly funded. Since 1985 there was a definite trend toward thinking home schooling was a good idea. In 1985, 73% said it was a bad idea, but since the turn of the century results were more neutral. When questions were asked about home schooling raising the nation’s academic or citizenship standards the public felt neutral or not sure. Survey participants overwhelmingly supported the idea that home schools should meet certain educational quality and teacher quality standards by more than 80%.

The public firmly believed that if private schools accepted any public money, they should be accountable to public authorities the same as public schools including meeting the same teacher certification requirements. If parents were given the choice in 2015 to choose any public school these were the four most important factors in their selection: quality of teachers, courses offered, maintaining student discipline, and class size. Student test scores were not an important factor when making their choice. Although the results from 1996 and 2010 demonstrated that most parents (55%) liked the school that their children currently attend. This may be because in 1989 and 1993 more than 50% said that allowing children to choose their own school would not improve all schools, rather it would help some and hurt some. Despite the favorability that Americans have with allowing choice for children to attend charter, private, online, or homeschool there was solid evidence asserting that they do not think public funds should be used to supplement private schools. Over the years questions related to voucher programs remained neutral. Americans did not think vouchers would make much of a difference in education overall with equal numbers favoring and opposing them.
**Curriculum/Instruction.** The quality and variety of courses offered in our schools has historically been very important to Americans. Schools that offered many courses had higher favorability scores from parents. In addition, adults believed that schools should teach character/morale/value curricula (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019). Figure A1 illustrates the results from surveys conducted in 1993 and 1999 with a list important values and the percentage of adults that thought each value should be taught in school.
Figure A1

Values and Percentage of the Public That Believe They Should be Taught in Schools

Note. Data from PDK Poll Topics and Archive (2019) and Gallup (2020).

Clearly Americans wanted their public schools to partner with them to teach the core values that their country was founded upon. Except for the last two controversial items sexual orientation and abortion, these character values were known to strengthen societies (National
Council on Family Relations, 2013; Bennett, 2012). Related to this are strong survey results indicating that citizens wanted children to learn service and supported requiring service learning to graduate (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019). In 2008, 61% of public-school parents felt that the senior year in high school was not valuable. The senior year in high school could be more valuable if they were challenged to take college-level classes and to participate in at least one internship (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019).

From 1970 – 2014 survey results showed a trend from the curriculum “already meets needs” to “needs to be changed.” In 1977, 83% favored a “back-to-basic” movement and in 1982 adults said more emphasis on basics was the best way to raise academic standards. In 1990 and 1994 the top five subjects that needed more emphasis were: mathematics, English, computer training, career education, and science. Music and art were dead last. These results were supported in 2002 and 2008 when the pollsters indicated that 56% and 52% of the respondents, respectively, agreed that some subjects should have less emphasis so that students could focus on the basics. The results from 1987 showed that three out of four respondents said returning to basics would improve education.

In 2012 questions about a common national core surfaced. This indicated that pollsters supported such a core and stated that it would make the United States more competitive globally (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2013). However, two years later the narrative had completely flipped when most Americans opposed Common Core State Standards (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2014, 2015). This happened due to a massive political effort to oppose government overreach and the support of local control of curriculum decisions (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2015). From 1980 – 2014 the poll results showed steady support for local school boards having the greatest influence over what was taught in schools.
**Finances/Funding.** Throughout the years that the poll was conducted some of the most common and important questions asked about public support for increased funding, equalization of resources, and higher taxes. Americans have consistently expressed support for equalization of funding between poorer and wealthier districts (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989, 1991, 1993, and 2002), increased taxes for education (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989, 1993), and directing increased funding from the federal government should go to education (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1982). Even though historically, the public did not support raising taxes. But when the question indicated that the increased funding would be used to increase academic standards and results the public strongly favored tax hikes. This indicated that the public was firmly against generic tax increases but supported them when specifically used for educational improvement. Additionally, in the early 1970s polls showed that the public favored increased state taxes for education versus decreased property taxes. This closely correlated to the results from 1993, 2001, and 2010, which indicated that 67% said that the money spent affected the quality of education “a great deal and quite a lot” (early 1970s). In 1998, 50% indicated that the quality of education was directly related to the amount of money spent. This makes perfect sense; money does matter if used with specificity to improve educational conditions. The results favoring or opposing tax increases seemed to depend heavily on the content and language used in the questions, especially when the state cut other budgets to keep education harmless (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002). Keeping this in mind nearly every respondent in 1991 said they would support local education foundations to attract financial support from private companies and individuals. This could potentially exacerbate unfair funding for wealthier districts. In 1986, the poll specifically asked about raising alcohol
and cigarette taxes and having a higher percentage of lottery money to support schools. As can be imagined these all received overwhelming support.

When the pollsters inquired as to how to address budgets shortages, the poll showed that year after year “administrative position reductions” was always the most expressed response (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1971, 1976, 1982, 1991, and 2002). Other common ideas with more than 50% support included cutting unpopular classes (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1971), reduce the number of counselors (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1976, 1982), have teachers instruct in year-round schools (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1971), and “keep present level of education funding by spending cuts in other areas” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002). It was also clear that Americans favored having less strings attached to federal money that came to districts. This allowed the local school board to reallocate money in ways that best meet the needs of their students.

In the mid to late 1990s budget surpluses were more common. When the poll asked about how this money should be spent, 50% of Americans clearly said that it should be spent on education with only 31% saying taxes should be decreased.

**Government and Politics.** The polls addressed several political issues over the years ranging from constitutional amendments for education to how well the three latest presidents have supported education. In 1974 the poll showed that a constitutional amendment to permit prayer was widely supported (77%) and an amendment to give public money to parochial schools received 52% and was reaffirmed in 2001 with 62% support.

From 1977 to 1987 there was moderate evidence that the federal department of education was not needed, especially because the public believed most decision-making power should belong to the states or local school boards (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1987, 1995,
2000). More questions were asked about the federal government and what grade the respondents gave various government officials for their work to improve public schools. Only 15% gave President Bush an A or B grade (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992), 40% gave President Clinton an A or B (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2001), and President Obama received an average of 36% A or B grade for 2009 – 2015. The polling data (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1996, 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2012) indicated by a wide margin that the Democratic Party was more interested in improving public education. The results were not conclusive when considered using data from 1992 and 2001. During these years the U.S. Congress, state governors, and state legislators were also given a grade about their effectiveness in improving public schools. The data in 2001 were about 25 percentage points higher than in 1992. Perhaps, the economic growth of the 1990s left the public less concerned about everything, including schools. When the economy was flourishing everyone was more optimistic about his or her community, including schools.

Every improvement proposal that Presidents Bush or Clinton proposed had strong favorability (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1994, 1997, 2001). This indicated that their proposals, in the minds of the respondents, were well reasoned and likely to create educational success. Most of these related to increased accountability measures. Graduating as an incentive for earning a driver’s license was strongly supported in the poll. In 1991, the community was asked if they supported withholding funding, offering rewards, and non-renewal of contracts for school employees if they did or did not show progress toward national goals within a reasonable time. Results showed that withholding funds was not popular, but incentives for improvement and firing principals and teachers when student performance was low were well supported as a way to make schools more accountable.
Higher Education. It was no surprise to see that polling data manifested that Americans valued a college education (Haskins et al., 2009) for their children. They knew that post-secondary education resulted in more job opportunities and better wages. The data also demonstrated that developing the best education system in the world was the most important way to ensure America’s future strength versus developing the most efficient industrial system and building the strongest military in the world (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1982, 1984, 1988, 1991). More than 80% confirmed that college was important (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1974, 1978, 1983, 1985, 2010, 2014, 2015). In fact, in 1995, 98% said they wanted their oldest child to attend college. Data from the 2010 – 2015 polls further showed that a high school education was not enough to be ready for the world of work and high school dropouts were not ready. Consequently, citizens vigorously favored federal assistance including Pell grants, the GI Bill, more scholarships, additional work-study opportunities, loan repayments for service-oriented careers, free community college, and low interest loans for college students (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989, 1995, 2008, 2015). In 2015 people were asked about how important they thought it was for students in their community to learn about entrepreneurship and starting a business. The results were shocking, 90% said it was somewhat important or very important.

Knowledge/Awareness of Schools. The pollsters were interested to understand how much knowledge/awareness the community had about their public schools since the first poll in 1969 to the 45th poll in 2013. In four separate polls the respondents suggested that they “know a lot” or are “well informed” about their public schools. They said they knew how many dropouts there were, understood the curriculum, and how much was spent per child. This conflicts with other data that showed only 47% knew the name of the elementary principal in their area and
60% did not know the name of the local high school principal. The results for knowing the school board president were even more dismal; only 26% said, “Yes.” Plus, most citizens did not volunteer in public schools. When asked in 2012 if they had in the last 12 months, only 27% had.

When asked about the media’s work on reporting of education and local schools the public felt by a small margin that they gave a “fair and accurate picture” of education (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1977, 2009) but could do a lot to improve their reporting. The primary suggestion was for reporters to spend more time in classrooms to “see what really happens” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1977) because they mostly heard bad stories about teachers in the new media (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2011). It only took two years of negative reporting for Americans to oppose standardized test scores. The most popular method for receiving information was still newspapers (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1983, 2009). In 2011 a majority supported this practice, but in 2013 more than 63% opposed it. The negative reporting of the news media had a positive result for teachers and administrators at least in changing the public perception. In fact, the data displayed a stronger sentiment for doctors and police officers to have their performance reviews made public than teachers (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2013).

**National Goals.** PDK and Gallup believed that asking people about utilizing tax money for initiatives almost certainly indicated whether they strongly support the initiative or not. In other words, citizens spoke loudly with their wallets. In 1991 the pollsters asked whether the accountability measures for schools “are/are not” making enough progress and how money can be used to punish or help. The public opposed withholding funds from schools that struggled by 57% and favor rewarding schools with extra funds if they did well. These results demonstrated a
belief that test scores were influenced by many factors and withholding money would not help. Interestingly, they did favor firing teachers and principals.

When asked in 1990 if they would support political candidates that were strong supporters of Goals 2000, they overwhelmingly said they would by 61% - 73% depending on each of the goals. However, the citizens’ understood the goals, standards, curriculum, and testing differed from state to state and county to county (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989). During these two years of survey data, they liked the idea of nation-wide goals rather than regional goals. When asked in 1990 and 1991 if the country would meet Goals 2000 the results were mixed. The beliefs that all children coming to school ready to learn, the graduation rate being 90%, and every child leaving grades 4, 8, and 12 having competency all showed neutral results with about 50% saying we will and 50% saying we will not achieve the goals. However, when asked about leading the world in science, every adult being literate, and every school being drug free, 65% of the public said we would not achieve these goals. Apparently, they believed the idea of national goals was a good idea and they liked the goals, but the timeline was a bit ambitious even though only about 25% of respondents have heard of the goals (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992). It should be noted that 61% of respondents believed that professional educators should set the national goals; every other category had less than 20% supporters (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989). The following year data showed that most citizens believed our progress was either “not too much” or “none at all” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992). With these goals in mind Americans in 1991 said they would favor a report card for each school indicating their progress.

**No Child Left Behind Act.** Two years after No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed by Congress, polling questions were asked to determine the public’s attitudes about the law. Data
from 2003 – 2010 demonstrated a slight favorability rating increase for the bill from 18% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2003) to 29% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2010). Between the years 2006 – 2010 only about 25% said the law helped the performance of local public schools and less than 50% reported they had at least a fair amount of knowledge about the law. By 2008 the public had learned enough about the law that they either wanted it changed significantly (42%) or it should be allowed to expire (25%). Having only 16% support indicated the law was not beneficial.

When it came to finding out how Americans felt about the evaluation and testing portions of the law, the data were quite conclusive and also confusing in some respects. The public supported a national test and preferred that it measured progress rather than achievement against a fixed standard (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002, 2003, 2009). Digging further, the data showed a belief that one test at the end of the year was not a fair measure of the school (2003 – 2006), that scores should not be reported by subgroups (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2004 – 2006), and testing only math and language caused educators to “teach to the test.” This meant less time was spent on other important subjects (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2003-2007). Also, 79% reported that English Language Learners (ELLs) should pass a language test before their scores could be used for the school’s report card.

When schools did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) what should be done with them? Several inquiries sought public opinions on these. The most popular solutions were: to offer after school tutors by state approved private providers (in 2003 and 2004 tutoring provided by teachers in the current school was a more popular idea), option for students to transfer schools (conversely, in 2003-2006 parents said we should improve the current school), and more funding (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002). With regards to special education the public was
not sure if their school should be labeled needing improvement if the only category not meeting standards was the special education population (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2004, 2005). Also, these students should not be required to meet the same standards (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2003-2007), nor should their scores be “included with tests scores of other students in determining whether the school is in need of improvement” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2004, 2005). When asked how we should attract Highly Qualified teachers the data in 2007 indicated smaller class sizes, financial incentives for good teaching, and high base salaries would help.

**Operation of Schools.** Throughout the years that the PDK/Gallup poll has been administered, questions have appeared to ascertain specific aspects of school operations. The public firmly believed that a smaller class size would make a significant difference in schools and even supported tax increases for them (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989).

Control of school operations was a controversial topic with varying poll data. Local control of schools was a popular idea, and even though the public supported parent advisory groups, they did not necessarily think that such groups should control the curriculum. They preferred local school boards have this power (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1977, 1978). In 1991 opinions changed to favor teachers and principals having more control of decision making for their school instead of the district and in 1989 the parents said they wanted a little “more say” for allocation of funds and courses offered. Also, in 1989 the public favored giving principals more power to effect change, but also wanted them to have more accountability. This meant that they would be released if the school did not meet certain benchmarks. Should teachers be given more power and be able to unionize if agreement could not be made with a school board? The public was split on their opinion but was firm on the idea

When it came to drug and weapon policies the public was somewhat satisfied with the current policies (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997) and nearly 90% favored zero tolerance polies (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997, 2000).

Addressing childcare and preschool the public strongly supported federal subsidies for single parent homes (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992), in 1993 they wanted childcare to be in schools and believed parents should pay some of the cost (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1981, 1992). Americans were willing to pay more taxes to support preschools (1992, 2006, 2013) and believed these programs helped poverty students a “great deal or quite a lot” (78%). Kindergarten should be compulsory, but not preschool (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1986, 2009). The public did not support boarding schools (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1976). In 1992, the public reported that they believed school buildings should be used more than just for education; they wanted them open during vacations, weekends, and after school for health, social services, and other government agency supports for children. In 1988, poll takers supported (70%) before/afterschool programs for latch-key children.

Extra-curricular activities were extremely important to our country. In 1997 and 2013, 90% and 94% respectively indicated that extra-curricular activities were either fairly important or very important. They believed that many sports should have co-ed participation (tennis, swimming, and track), but should not in football and wrestling (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1985). Should participants in these activities maintain certain grade point averages?
Ninety-six percent agreed affirmatively that they should have a ‘C’ or better (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997).

School buildings were more expensive than necessary (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1972), were in disrepair (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1999), and were overcrowded in 1973 and 1999. Data also showed that people agreed that the number of students in a school inversely impacted student achievement (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002), and respondents preferred high schools to have less than 1,500 students (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1998), middle school less than 1000 (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002), and elementary schools less than 500 (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002).

Attendance has been consistently investigated since 1972. In 1972, respondents said that children should be required to attend school until age 18 and in 1996 this belief was reaffirmed with 64% opposed to eliminating compulsory attendance laws. The public felt so strongly about spending time in school they said in 2006 that the school day should be extended by one hour (67%) and in 1989 they would approve laws to increase time in school by 25%. In 1993, 47% said we should extend the school year. When asked what they favored, extend the school day or school year, they favored extending the school year (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989, 1993, 2006). However, when it was asked if they would support these proposals if they had to pay for tuition, 56% opposed the idea (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1991).

**Parent Issues.** Most of the public participation in schools related to attending concerts, plays, or sporting events (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1983, 1991, 1994). When it came to serious problems that children faced, parents believed that schools should be compelled to inform parents; these include substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997).
With regards to how much parents supported school, they bolstered fundraisers and believed fees should be charged for certain things (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1971). They thought homework was a good thing, took about the right amount of time, and had enough time to help their child (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1977, 1978, 1985). In 1971, poll respondents (reported by 81%) thought that requiring parents to attend one evening class per month to help them know how to increase their child’s behavior/interest in school was a good thing. And in 1993, 96% thought that parents needed much encouragement to take an active part in educating the youth. Eighty-three percent reported attending parent/teacher conferences (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1981).

Parent responsibility seems to be a key issue with many educators today. According to the data Americans believed most the credit/blame for child success and failure should be placed on the parents. In 1978, 86% said that parents should be responsible to for a child’s vandalism but wanted the schools to be a partner and share the responsibility (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1976). Five out of eight parents said they would take the principal’s or teacher’s side when discussing student misbehavior or academic challenges (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997). Since 1977 parents have become more active in limiting the amount of television that children watch. In 1977 only 35% said the limited television viewing and in 1985 the percentage had increased to 49%.

In 1979 two former questions were asked, “What do you like best about the school your child attends?” The second question was, “What do you like least about the school your child attends?” Here were the top four responses to the first question: good teachers, high standards, special programs, discipline. The most popular responses to the second question were: lack of discipline, low standards, teachers, and poor conditions of the building. Teachers, standards, and
discipline are mentioned in both. These all pertain to each individual school. Perhaps this data is more pertinent for local school principals. Looking at this data from a national survey may not be as instructive for policymakers as would a local survey.

**Purposes/Goals of Public Schools.** In 1972, Americans believed that schools should help students get better jobs and teach them how to get along with others. In 1986 we see a slight change with getting a better job followed closely by preparation for a better life. In 1996, the purpose in people’s minds had shifted a little more. The main purposes were to prepare students to be responsible citizens, to become economically self-sufficient, to promote cultural unity among all Americans, and to improve social conditions. In 2000, the number one purpose for schools was to prepare people to become responsible citizens. The three main goals were to help people develop the ability to speak and write correctly, develop a standard for what is right and wrong, and develop understanding about different kinds of jobs and careers. In 2006, poll results indicated a sharp shift toward preparing students academically. Also, in 2016 the public identified the most important skills that schools should address: critical thinking, factual information, good citizenry, the ability to work successfully in groups, and the development of good work habits. It was clear that they thought schools were not doing a good enough job at meeting obligations to teach these things to students.

**Quality of Education.** Every year that the PDK/Gallup poll has been conducted citizens have been asked to grade several aspects of schools ranging from other parents and teachers to specific classes and culture. The overall grade for schools in the community in which the respondents lived has fluctuated over the years between 40% and 50% that give an A or B grade. Between 1977 and 1983 the percentage was a bit lower, 30% - 39%. Interestingly, 1981 – 2016 the pollsters started inquiring about how people thought of the nation’s schools (not their
community school) in a different question. The results were more dismal. More than 60% gave the schools an overall C or D grade. When filtering for only what public school parents thought about the school their oldest child attended, the results were more positive. The percentage that gave an A or B was usually 65% - 70%. Elementary schools had a higher percentage of the public that gave them an A or B grade than did the secondary schools by 13% (1981, 1987, 2007). Year by year letter grades are stated for the nation’s school are presented in Table A1 and year by year letter grades for local schools are presented in Table A2. The overall feeling that elementary teachers are doing A or B work has improved to 58%, while the percentage for high school teachers and administrators was around 43%; although in recent years the score for administrators has grown to 54% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1987, 1990, 2011). Local elementary principals had a 9% approval rating higher than secondary principals (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1987). School boards and parent upbringing continued to have very low scores; 37% and 36% respectively (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2011). It is apparent that public opinion about their community schools has generally remained high. However, the attitude toward the nation’s schools has consistently been low.
Table A1

Year by Letter Grade for the Nation’s Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A &amp; B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Fail</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This question was first asked in 1974. “Students are often given the grades of A, B, C, D, and FAIL to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in your community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the nation’s public schools—A, B, C, D, or FAIL?” Data from PDK Poll Topics and Archive (2019) and Gallup (2020).
Table A2

*Year by Letter Grade for Local Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A &amp; B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Fail</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This question was first asked in 1985. “[IF HAS A CHILD IN SCHOOL] Using the A, B, C, D, FAIL scale again. What grade would you give the school your oldest child attends?” Data from PDK Poll Topics and Archive (2019) and Gallup (2020).

**Race Issues in Schools.** Questions specifically asking about race and race relations only happened during five surveys: 1971, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 1998. These survey results indicate that Americans appreciated racial and ethnic diversity. In 1996, 83% said it was desirable to have student bodies representative of the U.S. population in our public schools. They favored more classes to promote tolerance (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992, & 1998). Integration has helped black student, but not necessarily white children (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1971, 1988, & 1996). The percentage of black teachers in a school should reflect the percentage of black students in that school (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1996). The public favors integration. However, they are not sure that it has increased student achievement (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1996).

**Special Populations.** Even though the public historically has been supportive of racial integration they did not seem to be as supportive of integrating students with mental handicaps
into the same classes with non-disabled students. They wanted them in a special class (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1995, 1998). Although, they supported having physically handicapped children with non-disabled peers (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1992). Similarly, they believed that gifted students should also have their own special class to attend (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1997). Additionally, the public favored more spending from the federal government to support special education programs (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1977, 1995).

As for undocumented/illegal immigrants, the public is split on whether these children should be able to attend free public school. They wanted these students to learn English in public schools before enrolling in regular classes (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1993, 1998, 2005). They also opposed teaching these children in their native language (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1988).

Americans (79%) felt in 1978, 1990, and 2001 that minority children had the same educational opportunities as whites did and they favored rewarding schools that increased academic achievement among minorities as measured on standardized tests (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1988). The public felt (84%) in 2011 that community public schools were doing either an effective or very effective job supporting students that had parents in the armed services.

**Standards.** Americans favored high standards (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1995) that were consistent throughout the country (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2008) and thought either our standards were “just right” or “too low” (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1999, 2015, 2016). High standards would help the quality of schools (1987) and would encourage low-income students to do better in school (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p.
1987, 1995). It is important to understand that Americans thought, “these standards should be established by a collective group of state education experts rather than the federal government” (2008).

Social promotion or moving students through the grades regardless of their academic achievement was strongly opposed. In 1999, 72% favored children meeting stricter standards before they were promoted. PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. Additionally, children could be promoted and skip grades if they passed applicable grade level examinations (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1978, 1983, 1990).

**Social Issues.** In the mid-1980s the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) became a big concern, especially in the U.S. In 1986 the AIDS scare made its way into the PDK/Gallup poll. By this time AIDS education and understanding had spread and the public was no longer as fearful. The 1986 poll supported this: 81% said that AIDS was not acquired simply by being in a crowded space (like a school) and 67% said they permitted their children to attend school with a peer that had AIDS.

In 2001 questions about guns and firearms were asked. The public supported teaching firearms classes in school (55%). But 73% said that school security employees should not be allowed to bring their handgun on campus.

Another hot topic in the 1980s and 1990s was the issue of school prayer. In 1984 a constitutional amendment was being debated, 93% of the public were aware of the proposal and 71% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1987) and 74% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1995) said they believed only a small percentage of people would be offended by the new law. Even though the Supreme Court ruled that prayers at graduation ceremonies were unconstitutional based on the First Amendment, 74% polled still said that prayer should be
allowed (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1993). The public believed (55%) that allowing public prayer would increase the overall behavior of students either “somewhat” or “a great deal” and 70% preferred that the prayer was a moment of silence rather than a spoken prayer. If spoken prayer was allowed, 81% believed that it should reflect all major religions (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1995).

Health/wellness were major issues addressed in the poll surveys over the years. In 1992 and 1993 parents were not confident that passing out condoms to every student that wanted them was a good idea: only 43% supported such a proposal. However, 64% said it would decrease pregnancies, 71% said it would decrease the likelihood of contracting AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. In 1970, 65% of Americans supported sex education courses and 56% still approved if the course discussed birth control. They were split on allowing pregnant girls to attend school. Support for sex education courses increased up to 87% in 1998 for upper grades but attitudes were less supportive when asked if they supported it for grades 4 – 8.

The public consistently supported schools screening children for major health concerns including examinations for sight and hearing defects, inoculations, dental issues, and emotional problems (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1989, 1993, 1995). And 84% of respondents thought students should have certain vaccinations before they attended school (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2015).

**Student Issues.** Parents were asked about their beliefs regarding the academic ability of students in 2000, 2001, and 2010. Do all students have ability to learn? Is their success based on natural ability or hard work? Do most students achieve their full potential? It was discouraging for educators who believed that all students could learn at high levels to find that only about 53% of the public thought this was the case (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2000, 2001) and
only 16% said that students reached their full potential. However, it was refreshing those three
fourths of respondents believed that hard work or *grit* (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth &
Quinn, 2009) attributed to student success more than natural ability.

From 1975 to 2006 the difficulty of homework was a topic of inquiry. The pollsters found
that about 60% believed that it was not challenging enough in elementary or high school, which
may have affected how serious students took their schooling. Other important factors that
influenced a child’s motivation to work hard in school were family attitude, attitude of peers,
employers not caring about high school grades, and many colleges admitting all students (PDK
Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1994). Some schools, in 2010, considered paying students
small sums of money to reward academic achievement. The public was clearly against this
practice. When Americans were asked in 1974 how best to deal with disinterested high school
students, they indicated that the worst possible solution was to permit these students to quit.
Allowing them to quit would eventually lead to heavy societal cost. The two most popular
workable solutions were to have special training courses which would prepare them for jobs or to
have work-study programs (½ day at school, ½ day on-the-job training). In fact, in 1980 parents
supported the idea that schools should support counselors to assist recent graduates to get jobs.

**Teachers and Teaching.** When it came to attracting and retaining the best and brightest
teachers several ideas were explored during polling. Americans clearly knew that teachers were
the most important people in schools educating their children. Ideas outlined in 1999 such as
increased pay, tax credits for high performers, loans and scholarships for prospective teachers,
school-financed professional development, and increased pay for all teachers were all supported
by the American public. In 2003, the data indicated that it was hard for districts to attract and
retain good teachers. Therefore, legislatures adopted career ladder monies. In 1984 and 2008
people were asked for their opinions about these monies; they overwhelmingly favored the idea. But they were not sure if unionization of teachers had helped or hurt the quality of education (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1976, 2011) and were mixed on their favorability of collective bargaining or forcing nonunion members to pay dues. One aspect of this was whether they supported tenure or not. The public disliked tenure: 1974 (56% opposed), 1977 (50% opposed), and 2009 (73% opposed). When disputes arose between governors and teacher unions, 71% of republicans sided with the governors and 80% of democrats sided with the teacher unions (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2011). More specific questions about development and recruitment of good teachers were asked in 1993, 1996, 2010, 2011, and 2015. The public said that schools should try to recruit high-achieving high school students to become teachers. However, 60% of the public reported that if they were to make a career change, they would not become a teacher. When asked why more minorities did not become teachers the two most popular responses were that they could not afford college and the teaching profession had low salaries (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1993).

Americans overall trusted their teachers and principals (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2010 – 2015) and historically have said that they would like their child to have a teaching career although support for this has dropped from 75% in 1969 to 57% in 2014.

When looking for the qualities that parents thought were the most important to consider when selecting teachers, the data changed a little between the three years that it was asked, 1976, 1983, 2009. But the most frequently mentioned responses were consistent. Table A3 presents the qualities parents look for when selecting a teacher for their child and Table A4 highlights the characteristics of teachers that most positively influenced respondents’ lives.
Table A3

Qualities Parents Look for When Selecting a Teacher for Their Child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1976 Qualities in Order of Numbers of Mentions</th>
<th>1983 Qualities in Order of Numbers of Mentions</th>
<th>2009 Qualities in Order of Numbers of Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The ability to communicate, to understand, to relate</td>
<td>1. The ability to communicate, to understand, to relate</td>
<td>1. Dedication to teaching, professionalism, enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The ability to discipline, be firm, and fair</td>
<td>2. Patience</td>
<td>2. Caring about students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The ability to inspire, motivate a child</td>
<td>3. The ability to discipline, be firm, and fair</td>
<td>3. Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. High moral character, good person</td>
<td>4. High moral character, good person</td>
<td>4. The ability to communicate, to understand, to relate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Love of children, concern for them</td>
<td>5. Friendliness, good personality, humor</td>
<td>5. High moral character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Dedication to teaching, professionalism, enthusiasm</td>
<td>6. Dedication to teaching, professionalism, enthusiasm</td>
<td>6. Friendliness, good personality, sense of humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Friendly, good personality</td>
<td>7. The ability to inspire, motivate a child</td>
<td>7. Ability to discipline, to be firm and fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Good personal appearance, cleanliness</td>
<td>8. Intelligence</td>
<td>8. Patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Caring about students</td>
<td>9. The ability to inspire, motivate a child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data from PDK Poll Topics and Archive (2019) and Gallup (2020).

These responses closely match the characteristics that polltakers said described the teacher who most positively influenced their lives (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2010 and 2012) as shown in Table A4.
Table A4

Characteristics of Teachers That Most Positively Influenced Your Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 National Totals</th>
<th>2010 National Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Encouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentive/believed in me</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict/tough/discipline</td>
<td>Personable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging/demanding</td>
<td>Good/Quality Teacher/Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/great teacher</td>
<td>Helpful/Dedicated/Strict</td>
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Note. Data from PDK Poll Topics and Archive (2019) and Gallup (2020).

In 2006, when inquiring about why half of all new teachers quit the profession within the first five years, citizens listed these items at least 84% of the time as either very important or somewhat important: lack of parental support, lack of administrative support, poor working conditions in schools, lack of respect for teaching profession, and lack of good training. In 1983, the four top reasons citizens reported for teachers leaving the profession were: discipline problems, low salaries, unmotivated students, and low parental support.

An important aspect addressed on 11 separate polls dealt with teacher qualifications. Many of their responses were exactly what would be expected: teachers should have a four-year degree in the subjects taught, maintain a state issued license, should pass a knowledge test, should spend one year as an intern or student teacher (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2014), meet national teaching standards for certification, be required to pass board certification similar to doctors and lawyers, be retained on the basis of performance rather than seniority, and teachers should be laid off first based on student scores and principal evaluations (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1980, 1981, 1983, 1988, 1991, 1999, 2002, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015). In 2010, the most important
reason for evaluating teachers was to improve their ability to teach. Data suggests that from 1969 – 1985 teacher pay was, “about right” and changed to “too low” in the 1990 polling data. However, another question on the same poll showed that raising teacher pay might not improve education very much.

Closely related to this was the idea of merit pay. In 1984, 1985, and 2009 the data were consistent with 60% - 72% support for it. The top reasons that teachers should receive merit pay were achievement/improvement of students, principal evaluations, advanced degrees, and evaluation by peers. Surprisingly, parent surveys of teachers ranked last (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1984, 2009).

Conversely, the public was not supportive of paying teachers a base salary exclusively because of student performance (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2002, 2008) unless the scores were used to increase pay (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1988). It appeared that Americans liked the idea of incentivizing good teaching with bonuses or improved pay but rejected the idea of reducing pay. If pay were based solely on student performance teachers would flee poverty schools and flock to higher socioeconomic ones. The exception to this appeared in a poll in 1991, when the public favored hazard-pay for teachers that worked in dangerous school environments. And in 2003, 2008, and 2010, 65% said that teachers should be paid higher salaries as an incentive to teach in schools that have been identified as a school in need of improvement.

What do we do about teacher shortages? In the 2001 poll this very problem was explored. During general shortages, the respondents clearly supported student loan forgiveness programs, raising salaries, and recruiting from foreign countries. However, they opposed loosening certification requirements and allowing a person with a bachelor’s degree to teach
without requiring teacher preparation courses. When deciphering between higher class sizes with better teachers or smaller classes with lower quality teachers the data showed that people preferred larger classes by more than 72% (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 2011).

**Technology.** Questions about student use of technology were asked during five different polls over the years: 1983, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2011. These questions mostly asked about student access to technology. Over the years anywhere from 80% to 90% of parents wanted their children to have more access to computer technology. In earlier polls (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1983 and 1994), a few questions asked parents if they knew about companies giving schools televisions so that students could view “student news” stories, lasting about 10 minutes. These programs also included ads targeted at youth. The companies made money by selling television commercial time to advertisers. When parents were asked about this, 66% of those that had children in schools with this program approved the program. Whereas only 38% of those that did not already have it in their schools approved of the practice and 57% strongly opposed the idea. Parents began in 2000 to strongly support (75 – 82%) schools investing in computers for instructional purposes. Also, in the year 2000 parents said they wanted their children attending schools that used computers (81%). 72% said schools use technology a great deal or fair amount and 69% say that computer technology has improved instruction. Interestingly, only 51% of parents in 2011 reported that high school students should have their own computer to use at school. When asked about the most important reasons for high school students to have access to computer technology in classrooms, “prepare students for college or career” (77%) and “Increase classes in smaller/rural schools” (62%) were the two highest responses that parents said were very important. The next most important reasons were to “increase student motivation” (55%) and “access to high-quality teachers” (55%). In 2011, most
parents wanted electronic readers for middle school or high school students, but 72% opposed these devices for elementary students. Parents were split on whether it was better to have a high-quality teacher online or a lower quality teacher in person. Finally, parents preferred face to face learning over online school by a 19-point margin (59% oppose online learning - 40% favor).

**Testing.** In this category the polls primarily examined opinions about accountability measures which are often end of year standardized tests. Parents responded to a question in 1999, 2008, and 2015 to indicate the most accurate way to get a full picture of students’ academic progress. They were given five choices: examples of student’s work, scores on standardized tests, letter grades, written observation of teacher, or do not know. Examples of student’s work was the most popular answer. When the question was changed slightly in 2000 – 2002 the response was 53% - 68% in favor of classwork and homework in the form of a portfolio.

When learning about grade promotion and exemptions the public strongly supported those students only be promoted if they passed an end of year examination (PDK Poll Topics and Archive, 2019, p. 1978, 1983, 1984, 1990). However, in 2000 they said students in special education should be exempted from testing, but not English Language Learners, or students in vocational education. When asked a different question that was eliciting similar information in 2000 the public said that all students should be compelled to pass a test before they can graduate. They opposed special education students taking tests except for graduation. This result was confirmed in 2006 with 63% in favor of a graduation qualifying test. The results from 1991 indicated that 58% of American’s wanted students to repeat the grade if they did not pass the end of year test.

In 1996 and 2008 opinion poll data was collected to understand public perception about how our schools compare with schools in Asian and Europe. Surprisingly, they believed that the
U.S. schools rank lower in mathematics, reading, writing, science, and creativity/problem solving. In 2014 the results were similar; 46% of respondent reported that U.S. students performed in the middle of developed country test rankings (Program for International Student Assessment; PISA) test rankings and 50% said our children ranked below other developed countries. In 2015, 64% of Americans believed too much emphasis was being put on standardized testing and 59% opposed allowing students to “opt-out” of testing.

When asked whether schools should be required to take national tests for comparison to other communities in 1970, 1971, 1975, 1977, and 1988 the citizens strongly favored doing so by 70% - 81%. In 1993, the respondents indicated that the most advantageous reasons for administering standardized tests was to: identify areas in which students need extra help (91%), identify areas in which teachers need to improve (87%), and to rank public schools (72%). Data from 1992 was similar with only slightly lower percentages.

**Urban Schools.** Questions about urban schools fell into two categories, improving urban schools and taxes to improve urban schools. The public was asked about improving urban schools in 1989, 1993, 1998, and 2012. There was overwhelming support (93% - 97%) to improve inner-city schools. In 1989 the public was asked if they thought inner-city schools had improved. Only 12% said that they had, whereas 57% said they got worse, and 20% said they were about the same. In 1993, 1998, and 2012 the public were asked if they would support tax increases to improve the quality of urban schools. A strong majority (60% - 66%) each year said they would support higher taxes.

Figure A5 outlines the major issues asked of the public during the administration of the Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup polls from 1969 to 2019. The data represent the percentage of respondents that mentioned each item as one of the biggest problems in American schools.
Table A5

*Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1969-2019.*

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*Note.* *Issue not identified or results not published. Shaded box indicates issue(s) identified as that year’s number 1 problem (or number 1 and 2, if tied). Question: What do you think are the biggest problems the public schools of your community must deal with? Data comes from Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup (2019) and Gallup (2020).
Surveys of Teachers

First PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 1984 and 1985 (part a and b)


In 1984 teachers were identified at shopping malls to represent all teachers in America. Of those, 2000 teachers were randomly selected by a stratified sample based on region in the country and level of school. Gallup mailed a survey of questions created to solicit opinions of 30 different topics to the 2000 teachers; 813 returned the survey. A telephone poll of 100 teachers not selected was conducted to ensure that the 2000 selected were indeed representative in terms of attitude, socioeconomics, and location.

The attitudes of teachers were very consistent across all demographic categories with only slight and rare opinion differences between primary and secondary teachers. However, the opinions of teachers and the public varied greatly. They agreed on one-third of the issues and disagree on two-thirds. Teachers graded schools in general very high, even higher for their own school. On a typical grading system using A, B, C, D, and F, 66% gave schools in general an A or B and 75% gave the same grade to their own school. They also gave their peers high marks (78% A or B) but were less generous when grading administrators and school boards. They gave the lowest grade to parents with only 20% giving an A or B.

The U.S. public graded school boards higher than teachers did; 41% said school boards should get an A or B grade. The highest score was for teachers and administrators with 50% receiving an A or B. The general public’s grade for parents was significantly higher than teachers
graded parents; 33% of the public gave parents an A or B grade as opposed to 25% of teachers giving them the same grade.

Of the various educational topics ranging from teacher pay, professional satisfaction, prayer, and testing, teachers were very uniform in their opinions. Nine in 10 teachers said they are not paid enough and cite this as a main reason that teachers leave the profession.

Teachers overwhelmingly (66%) opposed merit pay for two reasons, challenges with evaluations and unintended consequences on morale. However, three-fourths of U.S. teachers said that about 33% of teachers in their schools were outstanding and deserved merit pay. They said that if merit pay were used, fellow educators outside the district should evaluate teachers. Only 20% believed parents and students should be involved in evaluations. Teachers and the public disagreed starkly on student performance figuring into evaluations. Teachers believed merit pay should be based on three things: outside evaluations, experience, and advanced degrees. Only 39% thought it should include student scores. Parents overwhelmingly (68%) believed that student performance on standardized tests was the most important factor for merit pay.

Teachers supported many of the educational recommendations made by national commissions and task forces such as stricter credit requirements for English, math, and science to enter college, more computer science, and more vocational training for non-college bound students. About 70% refuted the idea that lengthening the school day or school year was beneficial.

The public and teachers disagreed in identifying the most important problem facing education. Teachers believed it was lack of parental support and the public believed it was
student discipline. However, 94% of teachers said the courts, lack of respect for authority, and parents were to blame for poor student discipline.

When it came to testing, teachers and parents both agreed that passing a test should be required for high school graduation, although they disagreed on whether the results of the test should be published. Parents believed test results should be published, and teachers opposed this philosophy. The public and teachers agreed on allowing voluntary school prayer and which presidential candidate would improve education (Walter Mondale).

Teachers were slightly more pessimistic of their profession than the public. Whereas 31% of teachers would suggest teaching as a profession to their son or daughter, 40% of the general public would encourage one of their children to teach. However, teachers rated their societal contribution largest among 12 professions (including physicians, lawyers, clergy), but rated their status lowest among these. The public rated teachers’ contributions lower, but status higher.

Cognitive skills, problem solving, creativity, and communication abilities were the most important goals according to teachers.

Educators supported several other topics; 78% believe unions have improved education, inclusion of sex education in both high school (86%) and elementary (75%), and educator control of instruction and curriculum. The public disagreed with all of these. Only 20% believed unions helped improve education; only 50% said sex education should be taught in elementary schools, and local school boards should decide what is taught in schools.

Second PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 1989

The second poll again painted a bleak picture of the teaching profession; teachers still saw themselves as martyrs. “Overwhelming, they believe…they are unappreciated and under-rewarded, and they blame almost everyone [mostly parents and students] but themselves for
recognized school problems” (Elam, 1989). They graded themselves and their school highly but were less favorable toward their administrators and college preparation programs. Teachers opposed merit pay (66%). The 25% - 30% who favored it did so, not because it would improve education, but because good teachers deserved more pay.

Even though 82% of teachers said they are underpaid, only 37% of the general population agreed. Despite the low pay teachers opposed the idea of a longer school year even if they were compensated fairly.

More evidence of the martyr mentality was demonstrated by teachers’ desire to paddle children for misbehavior, telling their children not to pursue a career in education, and placing their jobs at the top of the pyramid in terms of value to society when compared to medicine, clergy, and judiciary and at the bottom of the list for prestige.

Teachers felt that they did not have enough influence over curriculum standards, discipline policies, and grading. Consequently, they said that recent reform efforts have not improved schools. Part of this may be because 50% of the teaching force has turned over since the first poll was given just five years previous.

Third PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 1996

In the third poll of teachers’ attitudes about American public schools (1996) the teachers continued to score public schools and their local boards higher than the public by 30% to 21% giving them favorable grades of an A or B.

Teachers and parents disagreed on the biggest problems. Teachers ranked low support from parents and poor funding as their top to concerns. Parents said the biggest challenge was drug abuse. Both agreed that student behavior was high on the list of challenges public schools faced.
The prestige of the teaching profession was still a concern for teachers. Only 46% said they would encourage their brightest pupils to pursue a career in education, whereas 73% of the public would. When asked about the main goals of education both teachers and parents agreed that the first goal should be to help students become responsible citizens. Teachers and the public agreed on several other issues; students should wear uniforms, too little or just the right amount was spent on special education, and teachers were more committed to improving education than local or state officials.

For comparison purposes PDK/Gallup asked teachers a few questions that were included in the 1984 or 1989 polls. Teachers grew in their support (by 19%) for the idea that high school students should pass a national assessment to get their diploma. In the two previous polls teachers said that low pay was the number one reason they leave the profession. In this poll they said it was student discipline. A majority still thought unions helped the overall quality of education and that prospective teachers should pass a state assessment.

**Fourth PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 1997**

Public school teachers continued to report in this poll that schools were doing well and that teachers were one of our countries most crucial assets. Seventy-three percent rated their own school highest, and local schools next. They rated the nation’s schools lowest (28%), which was still higher than the public scored schools. Teachers in the Midwest gave their schools higher grades than other regions. Also, most teachers (81%) said their peers were doing excellent work but were less generous when scoring their administrators. Only 47% gave them an A or B grade and even lower grades to local school boards and parents (35% and 18% respectively).
The specific student misbehavior as reported by teachers changed from 1984 to 1997. Drug abuse, truancy, and vandalism were the most common discipline issues in 1984; whereas in 1997 disruptions, disobedience, and dress code violations were more prevalent.

Parents and teachers continued to have different results when asked about the support parents gave to schools. Parents said they were very supportive of schools, but teachers were less optimistic about parental support. Furthermore, teachers said parents were more supportive if teachers said their child was not working hard compared to if they said they were disruptive.

More elementary teachers (45%) than secondary teachers (29%) said schools had improved in the last five years. Different regions of the country showed differing results; significantly less teachers in the East reported that schools have improved than in the South, Midwest, or West. Most teachers said (51%) a part time job was academically harmful for students, however only 32% of parents agree. Nearly one in two teachers believed there was too much emphasis on standardized testing and 69% were opposed to President Clinton’s initiative to offer voluntary standardized tests.

The public and teacher tended to agree that funding for public schools should come from income tax rather than property tax. Teachers said that parents had the right amount of decision-making influence over budgets, but parents strongly disagreed. They wanted more influence. The teachers and parents agreed that the curriculum was satisfactory.

*Fifth PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 1999*

Carol A. Langdon (1999), author of this poll found that over the years a problematic trend had emerged; the opinions of what happened in schools differed drastically between teachers and the public. Teachers formed their opinions while being with children seven hours
per day for nine months; other people often formed their opinions from anecdotal negative examples in news reports.

Teachers continued to give schools much higher ratings than the public. Opinions continue to differ when it came to the biggest problems in schools. Teachers believed low parental support and engagement were the most prevalent problems, but parents believed it was drug use. In recent polls teachers in general tended to see different challenges than teachers who worked in inner cities. For instance, inner city teachers graded schools lower and said that students were getting a worse education than the teachers received. Teachers in general said that the education system was better than it was 20 years earlier.

Only 14% of teachers approved allowing students to attend private school at public expense, whereas 44% of the public supported this proposal. Both agreed that private schools should have had similar or the same accountability measures as public schools. This year fewer teachers (17%) said teachers in high need subject areas should get paid more and the number one reason for teachers leaving the profession was low pay. Teachers (60%) and the public (67%) agreed that prayers should be allowed in schools.

When teachers were given eight choices, they said the biggest problem in schools was alcohol use and the public still thought it was drugs. Asked to rate the importance of six measures indicating school effectiveness teachers ranked good citizenship as highest and the public scored graduation as the most important.

**Sixth PDK/Gallup Poll of Teachers, 2000**

The trend showing that teachers’ and the publics’ opinions continued to differ as to the important problems in schools. It was certain that when this difference existed, little would change to resolve them (Langdon, 2000).
Inner-city teachers continued to rate schools lower than suburban and rural teachers. “Teachers and the public were very consistent on which factors they thought were fairly important in choosing a school. The quality of the teaching staff was the unanimous first choice, followed closely by discipline and curriculum” (Langdon, 2000). Interestingly, 59% of teachers said school reputation was an important factor, but 80% of the public thought it was. A considerable difference in opinions was that 12% of teachers believed exposing students to a diverse population was important, whereas 45% of the public agreed. Teachers thought more parental engagement would improve learning.

When asked about teacher pay the public favored (90%) merit pay. Teachers were much less supportive (53%). Teachers preferred pay increases for all teachers (89%), parents agreed slightly (62%). Forty-seven percent of the public supported using test scores to determine merit pay; only 3% of teachers approved this idea.

**Surveys of Principals**

Whether it is moving to Common Core, conducting teacher evaluations, or using data to drive learning, principals are on the front line of implementing educational change. Throughout the past 50 years principals have been surveyed or interviewed sporadically to solicit their opinions regarding specific topics or problems that they observe in education. Here are some of their concerns: declining enrollment, instructional leadership, guiding and evaluating teachers, paperwork, decision-making(data), scheduling, recruitment, evaluation, discipline and attendance, curriculum design, student outcomes, parental involvement, communication and collaboration, teacher apathy and time management (Abramowitz, 1978).

“Time is a real challenge for principals. There is no doubt about it,” Montana Office of Public Instruction assistant superintendent Steve York said. “I do think that sometimes it is
convenient for some principals to blame time — mainly, because this is scary work.” He continued, “We avoid being instructional leaders, and we use the excuse that we don’t have enough time to cover that fear” (Creatix Campus, 2019; Sriram, 2016).

A reasonable search of the literature produced 181 articles, books, or reports in which principals were surveyed to solicit their opinions. Of these 158 were specific to individual topics (see Figure A2) and only 23 asked them to share their general opinions about what they see as challenges (none asked about successes in general). The four most surveyed topics concentrated on leadership, special education, counselors, and safety. Figure A2 describes the number of specific topics asked of building principals over the past several decades.

**Figure A2**

*Types and Numbers of Surveys Asked of Principals*

![Graph showing types and numbers of surveys asked of principals](image)

**Leadership**

Most of the leadership surveys sought to find out about leadership styles, characteristics, and the role of principals. One study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (National
Center for Educational Statistics, 2018) explored how much influence principals felt they have over curriculum and their budget. They found that principals from small towns or rural areas have more influence over curriculum. This contrasts with suburban principals feeling that they have significant influence over budget expenditures.

There was a bristling debate as to what type of school leader would improve education. What dispositions, skills, and strengths are the most effective? And how do these impact the climate of schools? One of the most common questions asked of teachers when they got a new principal was, “How do you like your principal?” Clearly, teacher opinions of their leader matter. To canonize their opinions, they were surveyed along with their principals several times about leadership quality and school climate:

The need for principals to be aware and mindful of what teachers believe and how the principal is being perceived. More importantly, it isolates key areas for leaders to focus on when considering their school climate and what makes a difference. The daily work of teachers and principals is evidenced in the total school environment including student achievement. Some aspects of the environment are apparent upon entering a school; others require a more in-depth understanding of organizations and the ability to see the nuances that exist. Positive and negative relationships affect the school atmosphere, the climate is predicated on so many aspects of school life, and the successful integration would appear to be in the hands of the leader. (Kor, 2010, p.132)

Women as principals continue to be underrepresented especially in secondary schools even though most education professionals are women. “There are significant differences in perceptions of principal leadership behavior regarding gender. Principals also judge their own leadership behavior significantly different based on gender” (Nogay & Beebe, 2008).
Special Education

Principal attitudes about inclusion varied based on their experiences working with special education students. Praisner (2003) argued, “principals with more positive attitudes and/or experiences are more likely to place students in less restrictive settings.” Another study underscored, “The important role principals play in creating inclusive schools and the ways in which race, disability, family background, language, and immigration status effect principals in their efforts to promote inclusion (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Horrocks et al. (2008) said, “The most significant factor in predicting both a positive attitude toward inclusion of children with disabilities and higher recommendations of placements for children with autism was the principal’s belief that children with autism could be included in a regular education classroom” (p. 1462).

Counselors

Paramount among many comprehensive guidance programs in schools has been the varying perspectives principals hold toward counselors. Several studies have sought to clarify and better understand what principals think about the role of the counselor:

There was a definite difference between the perceptions of ideal counsellor role held by principals and counsellors. While there was considerable agreement as to the functions of the counsellor, there was much disagreement as to the school counsellor’s role. Principals saw the counsellor's role as largely one of administrative support. Their perspective was most often from the point of view of the institution while that of the counselor’s sprang from the needs of individual students. (Hassard & Costar, 1977, p. XX)

Although principals reported school counselors currently perform many non-counseling duties, they reported ideal duties like those outlined in the ASCA model (American School
Counselors Association, 2019). Most importantly, principals and school counselors value similar activities, and both would like to see school counselors involved in more direct services to students, parents, and teachers (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

**Safety**

School resource officers (SROs) became a fundamental blueprint to making safer schools. Although, with recent school shootings and resultant public debate, a proposal to arm principals and teachers has emerged. A recent study published in Policing: An International Journal (Chrusciel et al., 2015) found there is a large amount of support for SROs from both law enforcement executives and principals. However, in general, both groups of respondents did not believe armed administrators or armed teachers to be an effective school safety strategy.

Safe schools are essential for student learning. Students who are worried about their safety cannot reach their full academic potential. Whether or not they feel safe can be a result of parental and/or school personnel perceptions of safety. For this reason, Michael Ewton (2014) conducted a study to uncover parent and principal perceptions about school safety.

The findings of this study indicated that both parents and school principals had some perceptions regarding student safety that were not necessarily grounded in facts. It was, for example, not unrealistic to expect parents to rank on-campus shootings as among the most serious threats to student safety. With the high level of media exposure given to incidences of mass killing at schools and elsewhere, some parents did not have the information needed to understand the low rate of occurrence for such events. It was, however, unexpected that principals rated school shootings as the number one threat to school safety and the second most likely hazardous event to occur that would affect student safety at school or at a school-related function. Given the comparative rarity of murders in schools, school principals should realize
how likely it is that different types of events could occur during the school day. This misconception likely indicates a lack of safety training provided to principals from the school district level (Ewton, 2014).

**General Challenges**

A couple dozen studies were conducted in the last five decades asking principals to share their general perceptions of challenges in schools. Among the most serious concerns expressed were the challenges that children face. The ultimate goal of these studies (even if not explicitly stated) was to improve student learning. Figure A3 shows the number of sources for each topic that principals mentioned when asked about general challenges in schools. Only those with at least two sources are included in Figure A3.

**Figure A3**

*Types and Numbers of Sources When Principals Were Asked About Challenges in General*
Topics with one mention are: clean water, counselors, crime & justice, culture, data deprivation, disrespect, engaging stakeholders, family dysfunction, grade promotion, graduation, inclusion, infrastructure, interventions, legal issues, library, parent illiteracy, personnel issues, playgrounds, principal stress, principal tenure, resource allocation, safety, school reform, sports, teacher retention, technology, and vision/goals.

A newspaper columnist, Derek Brouwer (2014), reported in the Independent Record about an effective principal panel that was hosted in Helena, Montana. These principals were asked many questions including about their frustrations. Their perspectives on schools reflected what many other principals have said in various other surveys.

High school principal Paul Furthmyre said, “Instructional leadership starts at his desk, and he works closely with teachers to make changes and hone their craft. I cannot sit there and say I know everything. But I’m going to find out the answer with you,” he said of his can-do approach to leadership. “I’m not here to change my staff; I’m here to help my staff” (Brouwer, 2014, p. 1). Despite the school experiencing declining enrollments it has experienced increasing test scores. All a result of adapting the curriculum and intervening with at-risk students.

Lame Deer Elementary has struggled with attendance and behavior issues. Mrs. Foote established clear expectations and gets in the trenches with teachers. This has boosted morale. Consistency is key (Brouwer, 2014). Principal, Peggy Taylor said that relationships are vital in schools and it is important to build strong bonds with teachers and the community (Brouwer, 2014).

Education World (Education World, 2012) asked principals from around the country to state some of their biggest frustrations. Four common topics were unfunded mandates, parents as roadblocks, “lost” students, and autonomy (Education World, 2012; EW, 2019a; EW, 2019b).
John Jones, elementary principal in Kinston, North Carolina said, "Not having the resources to be effective at the job" is major frustration (EW, 2012, p. 1). Another principal Lee Yeager mentioned that the state kept decreasing the amount of money to match increasing programs. And "Deborah Harbin's biggest frustrations is trying to carry out rules and laws made by people who don't understand public schools" (Education World, 2012, p. 1). Both of these principals seemed frustrated by policymakers that do not seem to understand what is needed in schools.

Education (2012) further points out another frustration that principals face is parents. Principal Roy Sprinkle of the Bay Haven School in Sarasota, Florida explains, “Another issue that frustrates me would be families who do not value education and support their school's efforts” (p. 1). Principals in our study had similar sentiment. Family commitment is essential for student success (Education World, 2012, p. 1). Other principals said that parents can be helpful, but when the teacher-parent relationship breaks down it can be difficult to restore trust with the parents. Principals perceive parents making excuses for their children or try to fix everything so that their child does not have to experience any consequences. They tend to blame everyone except their child (Education World, 2012, p. 1).

Many principals expressed concern for a child’s future if they do not care. Some refer to these as “lost students.” These student decide that education is not important and a diploma is valueless. These students have severely limited job opportunities and their future will be constrained. The are many reasons for student apathy. Raffini (1988) argues that student self-worth and success is directly the result of student effort and ability. He continues to explain that apathy is really a failure-avoiding behavior. He states, “…these students now focus their effort on protecting their self-worth by seeking behavior patterns that allow them to avoid a sense of
failure (Raffini, 1988, p. 11). Principal Shaffer states, "I hate it when I know a student has potential to excel, but not the motivation to do so" (Education World, 2012, p. 1).

Other principals cogitated on the lack of autonomy and authority to do their jobs properly. Local, state, and federal mandates reduce the autonomy of school leaders and negatively affect their ability to provide the best education for students (Sanko, 2020). One principal from Michigan expressed something that many principals at all levels feel:

One problem I face that drives me totally crazy is the lack of authority to make critical decisions. Some districts do a good job of portraying the principal as the school’s final authority, but the reality in public education is that most principals lack the authority to make decisions necessary to ensure that outcomes can be directly attributed to their leadership abilities…If we want principals to be more effective, it is my belief that they need to be granted more responsibility for that which they are held accountable. (EW, 2019a, p.1)

In Africa principals face unique challenges not necessarily common in the United States. In Kenya, the most serious problems are students who do not have enough money to pay for books and school fees, not enough equipment, inadequate facilities, faculty housing, no playgrounds, student distance from school, and the academic language of English (Kitavi & Van Der Westhuizen, 1997).

New principals in Africa are often appointed based on their teaching stature with little regard to leadership potential. This is problematic when leadership skills are so needed in garnering essential resources and mentoring ill-trained teachers (Bush, 2006).
Conclusion

A study published in Education Research Quarterly (VanderJagt et al., 2001) surveyed 8,221 principals as a random representative sample from 71,946 possible. Compared results were based on school size, school level, rural/urban/suburban. The three main reasons for this nationally representative study were:

First, to develop strategies to prevent and alleviate school problems, we need to know the severity of those problems. Second, determining whether there is a difference between elementary and secondary with reference to school problems has implications for creating different strategies for each school level. Third, principals’ perceptions are very important for understanding the problems because they not only know the intricate details of discipline and factors contributing to problems faced by children, but also have a perspective on the whole organization rather than individual classrooms. Therefore, to understand, prevent, and alleviate the school problems encountered by children, it is essential to obtain information about these problems from principals. (VanderJagt et al., 2001)

The above quote clearly asserts the value of principal perceptions when trying to solve educational problems. At the outset of this study, it was predicted that principals would mention funding, student discipline, and demanding parents as their most common challenges. As analysis progressed, additional striking patterns were found that joined the list of most frequently mentioned challenges: a national vision is needed, low family commitment to education, principals need autonomy, school culture, principals thrive on challenges, and they highlighted many successes.
Principals were asked to explain what they would say if they had the undivided attention of the legislature for a few minutes. Surprisingly, principals were happy to thank the legislature for their work and efforts to support education. Principals would be expected to relish the opportunity to criticize and identify nefarious veiled efforts made by elected officials to allocate minute amounts of money for schools. Instead, they thanked the legislature for the positive things they did to sustain education; a stunningly positive approach to begin a policy conversation. This indicates that principals have the correct demeanor and approach to influence policymakers. Hopefully, this will not only inspire the 25 principals involved in this study but also thousands more to engage policymakers with an organized measured plan. The participating principals in this study were thrilled to share their viewpoint when asked. That is the problem: they are happy to share their ideas, opinions, experiences, and suggestions when asked, but as the review of the literature illustrated, they have not been sought out by pollsters, legislators, or policymakers often enough. Certainly, they have not been afforded a forum to share their unrestrained thoughts. Nor have principals actively asserted their opinions in meaningful ways.

Principals cannot control federal, state, or district policymakers, but they can certainly be a more powerful influence by making their voices heard. Experience has shown that government officials often create legislation based on a few anecdotal stories from a minority of constituents. Principals’ voices are important enough to understand that pollsters ought to conduct regular national surveys of school principals.

Furthermore, principals have been so focused, using all their strength to mitigate opposing forces that they have had little interest or energy to influence national and state education policy decisions in meaningful ways. It is past time that pollsters access their voices.
Historically, principals have been reactionary and quietly defensive toward policies that are neither efficient nor effective. Conversely, they need to drive the policy-making narrative. They are tough, are masters at protecting and buffering the outside influences that can wreak havoc in schools and understand the complete elephant. However, their voices are relatively silent because the policymakers have not regularly requested their viewpoints. This will not change on its own. School building administrators must make their voices known by organizing and intentionally engaging with policymakers.

This study occurred in only one school district but found enough rich information that it is certain we need to mine principal opinions consistently across the nation. Perhaps, national pollsters, like the NASSP, NAESP, or PDK and Gallup will be convinced to partner and create a frequent national survey to obtain the opinions of those with a central perspective—principals.
This qualitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted in a suburban intermountain school district. The purpose was not to generate inferential data that would represent opinions of all principals. However, other districts could extract valuable information and replicate these procedures for their purposes.

This type of study was situated in opposition to other traditional research methods. The main goal of traditional research methodology is to produce generalizable information. This method follows Kuhn’s assertion that scientific revolutions are necessary. We should not just try to solve a puzzle, but rather think beyond the puzzle (Kuhn, 2012). This qualitative method was purposefully chosen to address the specific goals of this study which are to understand more clearly what principals think are the biggest successes and challenges in education.

This theoretical framework was also based on the idea that schools are open systems (Scott & Davis, 2016) and principals are boundary spanners in the school (Goldring, 1997; Goldring, 1990). Open systems theory believes that a system (school) can only have as much variety as the environment (Scott, 2003). From a biological or physics perspective, “the characteristic state of the living organism is that of an open system. A system is closed if no material enters or leaves it; it is open if there is import and export, and therefore, change of the components” (Von Bertalanffy, 1950, p. 23). Schools are living organisms that require resources from the environment surrounding them. Principal boundary spanning includes the various techniques utilized to obtain resources for the organization from the environment. The interplay between the environment and the school perfectly exemplifies open systems theory.
This qualitative methodology helped explain the how and why of principal thinking whereas a quantitative method would simply show density citations without deeper understanding (Creswell, 2002; Flick, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The researcher relied on Flick’s model for extracting episodic knowledge using personal interviews (Flick, 2018a) asking open-ended questions which allowed interviewees to choose their own experiences to share (Flick, 1998). This approach allowed the researcher to access personal feelings, opinions, and individual perceptions on a deep level (Sabin, 1986). Additionally, the potential for group influence that is often found in focus groups was erased. Perhaps the most important advantage of the approach to this study was that a “human quality” was added to impersonal data work (Flick, 2000).

**Research Question**

The principal researcher has lived in four different cities in the chosen county, attended three separate schools (elementary, junior high, and high school), taught in a junior high, and has been a school administrator in six different schools (junior high and elementary); all in the chosen district. He has been a resident, student, teacher, and school administrator in the district for over 45 years. This gives him many advantages for conducting this research. Contextually, he understands the community and school district culture, political climate, and speaks the common educational language. Additionally, the principal researcher understands the personalities and communication styles of many of the interviewees. This helps to know what principals mean when they say certain words. This is important to prevent both homomorphic and heteromorphic fallacies while conducting the research (Tikkanen, 2020; Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

A brief discussion of homomorphism and heteromorphism in general is necessary. Homomorphism finds its roots in the Greek language, (homos) translated as “same” and
(morph) indicating “shape” or “form” (Tikkanen, 2020). The term made it in to two fields of study: mathematics (Silverberg, 2013) and formal language theory (Moll et al., 1988). In both homomorphism is referred to simply as, morphisms. In mathematics morphism relates to linear algebraic functions (Silverberg, 2013). Because our study does not directly relate to mathematical functions, no further explanation is necessary. However, in formal language theory a morphism is a word that has precisely the same meaning in two specific languages (Moll et al., 1988).

A homomorphic fallacy happens when two separate people use the same word [in English] and the researcher automatically assumes that they mean the same thing, but they mean two different things. For example: during this study, many principals stated that funding was a challenge. It would be a homomorphic fallacy to assume that they all meant low funding and that more funding was the answer; when in fact one or two principals may have been thinking that we need to be more efficient with the current funds rather than simply needing more.

A heteromorphic fallacy occurs when a researcher hears two separate words used [in English] and automatically assumes they mean something different, although both interviewees mean the same thing. For example, one principal may use the phrase, the community and another may use the word parents to describe parents of children that attend their school. A researcher could infer that community means parents, businesses, and government officials, even though the interviewee meant community as parents only.

To avoid heteromorphic and homomorphic fallacies, the researcher would reflect for several days on what principals said and then asked a colleague to review the thinking. This is an important check to clearly understand what interviewees meant.
Interactions with school principals in various settings helped the principal researcher understand what principals really thought and that they have a wealth of knowledge that is going untapped. This led the researcher to want to know in a formal way what they say are the greatest strengths and challenges in education. To satisfy this desire the following questions were developed and asked of 25 principals:

1. What do principals think are the greatest strengths in education?
2. What do principals think are the greatest challenges in education?
3. If they had the undivided attention of the state legislature for two minutes, what would they say?
4. What are the demographic characteristics of principals and how do these related to what they will say in the three previous questions?

Using episodic interviews for conducting qualitative research can be very powerful. Although they can be very time consuming, costly, and open to various interpretations the advantages are immense. Researchers can access personal feelings, opinions, and individual perceptions. Questions that are more detailed can be asked and a high response rate achieved. Furthermore, vagueness can be corrected through follow-up questions. This indicates that precise meaning of questions and answers can be delineated. Additionally, the potential for group influence that is often found in focus groups is erased. Perhaps the most important advantage is that a “human quality” can be added to impersonal data work. (Flick, 2000)

Qualitative research is becoming more important in today’s world. “Qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations, owing to the fact of the pluralization of life worlds” (Flick, 2006, p. 12). Social change and pluralization are creating numerous differentiated narratives that social scientists find it challenging to comprehend and explain what
is happening. This makes qualitative research and its primal essence more important than
previously thought. It is exploratory in nature and examines opinions, thoughts, motivations, and
attitudes. Qualitative Research is commonly used to dig deeper into hypothetical problems and
helps researchers expose themes and patterns of life. Data gathering techniques range from
structured methods to open-ended interviews. Because the amount of work required to record,
transcribe, and analyze data is massive, small sample sizes are usually employed.

The qualitative method selected in this research used episodic interviews. This technique
has psychological roots, specifically, using narrative accounts when conducting social science
data collection (Flick, 1998). Episodic interviews collect valuable narrative and semantic data.
Narratives (episodic stories) are important ways that people make sense of the world around
them even though life is not necessarily narrative in structure. Robinson and Hawpe (1986)
explain that when one reflects on life events and tries to understand them, persons will create
stories in their mind that are ‘essentially narrative’. This means that narrative thinking is merely
our way of making sense of events with stories. Flick concludes that narrative thinking is,
“Establishing a fit that is, making a story out of experience” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2003, p. 77).

James in 1893 said, “all human thinking is essentially of two kinds – reasoning on the
one hand and narrative, descriptive contemplative on the other” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2003, p. 76).
Reason is essentially semantic knowledge about abstract concepts that are decontextualized from
stories; narrative or episodic is tied to specific circumstances - time, location, people, and
experiences (Flick, 2018b).

To be inclusive in this study the researcher gathered as much semantic and episodic data
as possible. The following criteria (Flick, 1998) was used in creating the interview questions:

1. Use general questions as invitations to solicit general answers.
2. Mention concrete situations and experiences in which interviewees participated.

3. Include questions general enough to allow interviewee to choose their own experiences to share including the way they want to share it.

Figure B1 visually expresses how both semantic and narrative data is uncovered during episodic interviews. As interviewees narrate their stories and express ideas with experiences this graphic demonstrates the interconnectedness of concepts, images, and situations.

**Figure B1**

*Semantic and Episodic Knowledge Discovery Using Episodic Interviews*

Note. Graphic from Flick (1997b).

In addition to the interview questions, each interviewee completed a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). The demographic questionnaire collected standard data such as age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, years as an educator, years as an assistant principal, years as a
principal, level of formal education completed, level of school supervised, student count, and percentage of students receiving free/reduced lunch.

**Interview Timeframe and Location**

The possible principals were contacted either via email or phone to set up an interview appointment. All interviews occurred from June 14, 2018, to August 31, 2018. All interviews occurred in person in the respective building principal’s office or conference room.

The purpose of this study is to inform policymakers based on the perspectives of traditional K-12 school principals concerning challenges and successes in education. For purposes of the study, it is logistically and financially unfeasible to interview all K-12 traditional public-school building principals in the state or even in the county. Consequently, a stratified random sample of K-12 traditional public-school building principals in the chosen school district was drawn to reflect the views of all district principals.

The sample comprised by implementing the SRS of 25, K-12 traditional public-school principals in one intermountain public-school district. The strata used to select the interviewees were:


2. Socio-economic Status (SES): Title One (Free/Reduced lunch 40%+) or non-Title One (Free/Reduced lunch 39%-).

3. Level of School: primary or secondary.

It is important to note that there are not any relevant distinctions based on urban, peri-urban, rural location of the chosen district schools. In addition, we did not include any Native American or Middle Eastern principals because, at present, there are not any principals from these ethnic groups in the district.
Sampling

The researcher used combined stratified random sampling (Ancharya et al., 2013) and purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) to explore perspectives of traditional K-12 public school building principals from the different salient demographic categories listed above to report about successes and challenges in education. Purposeful sampling was used because we wanted to make sure we had female and others from protected classes. After each of the eight categories were populated in a table of potential interview candidates conforming to the specified combination of categories (for example: female, ethnic minority-yes, primary school, and immersion school) three candidates for interviews were randomly selected within each category. When a category only contained three or less, then those available were interviewed. If a category did not have at least three principals to fill any of the eight target categories, (either because they declined or had low representation) their data was applied to the next least represented category. If data saturation had not occurred after interviewing and performing preliminary data analysis, an additional six would have interviewed until data saturation had been achieved (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Fortunately, this strategy was unnecessary.

The sample selected from a possible 90 principals working in district schools (62 Primary and 28 Secondary. Interviewees were chosen based on the approach described above. When more than three possible choices fit each cell, then they were randomly selected. When only three existed, then all of them were included. Table B1 represents basic demographic characteristics of the schools in which the participants work. Poverty is based on percentage of students in the participant’s school receiving free or reduced lunch. A school with at least 40% would be “yes.” The number of participants is also delineated by sex and school level.
### Table B1

*Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Poverty</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td>Elementary (n=12)</td>
<td>Secondary (n=13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Female (n=12)</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n=13)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, 25 principals were selected and participated in the interview. Initially, the researcher wanted to select 24 participants so that we could have three from each category identified in Table B1, but one extra was added from the secondary level because a principal that had not responded to the invitation to participate finally did. Because the researcher works with this principal, he did not want to cause hard feelings, thus included him in the study.

Having only four ethnic minority principals in the district posed representation challenges. All of them were included in this study. These four represent both sexes and both school levels. However, they were all working in Title-One schools.

### Data Collection and Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to prepare for the interviews: (a) an adapted version of the Demographic Questionnaire for School Leaders, (Appendix C); and (b) an interview protocol, entitled Interview Questions for School Leaders (Appendix C). The demographic questionnaire collected typical information containing, sex, age, marital status, ethnicity, years of formal education, years as a teacher, years as an assistant principal, years as a principal, years as a principal at current school, number of students in school, and percentage of students on free/reduced lunch (National Institutes of Health, 2001). The episodic interview protocol adapted by the researcher followed the instructions circumscribed for such interviews (Flick, 1997a).
Flick (2000) explained, an interview should include: (a) an encouragement to retell experiential events with “more general questions [aimed] at more general answers,” (b) discuss concrete experiences that the interviewees have had, (c) the questions should be open-ended enough to allow the interviewee to select their own stories to share (p. 77).

The developed protocol was designed to elicit the opinions of building level principals concerning their experience in public education. The questions asked of the participants traverse concrete stories beginning with general questions about the biggest problems in education and gradually leading to more specific examples of the problem. The same process follows for questions about the greatest successes. A final question about the legislature was added. Consent was procured from potential interviewees and the selected district (Appendix C). The steps used in the interviews followed Flick’s steps (1998):

1. Prepare an interview guide
2. Prepare a good introduction for the interviewee
3. Prepare questions for subjective definition
4. Try to cover areas of everyday life
5. Try to get details of the central parts of the study
6. Try to avoid generalized reasoning without personal reference in the interviewee’s responses
7. Make room for small talk conversation
8. Use a documentation sheet, a good audio recording, and quality transcription
9. Choose an appropriate method for coding and interpreting the narrative
Implementation Research Steps

This project used six basic steps. The steps were: approval, preparation, interviews, transcription, scrubbing and organizing data, and coding/analysis.

Step 1: Approval

In the spring of 2018, the project was presented as a prospectus and approved for continuance. Brigham Young University (June 2018) indicated that this project did not need IRB approval and approval from the district was received, March 2018. The district enthusiastically expressed their approval for this project. Immediately after IRB approval, the researcher began to set up interview appointments with the selected principals.

Step 2: Preparation

The researcher began the interview process by calling prospective interview candidates on the telephone. The researcher used the telephone script (Appendix C) to invite the principal to be interviewed. Every principal invited to participate gladly accepted an invitation to be interviewed. Many were enthusiastic in the acceptance. If initially a phone contact was not made a voice message was left. All those principals returned the call with-in 48 hours except one high school principal. He returned the call after one week because he was on vacation. All needed interviews (24 required for the study) were arranged; thus, it was not necessary to include this principal in the study. But the researcher still arranged for an interview with this principal for two reasons; the researcher has respected this principal for many years and wanted to hear his perspectives and the interview could serve as a backup in the event another secondary principal could not interview because of unforeseen circumstances. The researcher commenced arranging interviews with principals.
**Step 3: Interviews**

All interviews were conducted in person at the interviewee principal’s office or conference room. They began on June 14, 2018, and concluded on July 6, 2018. The interviews were anywhere between 20 minutes and 80 minutes.

The interviews began with small talk and greetings. Then a careful explanation of the purpose for the research study as well as the rights and protections in place for participants. The principals were given the informed consent form to sign. Next, they were given the demographic questionnaire to complete before we began the questioning. Some principals asked for clarification while completing the demographic questionnaire (primarily the questions asking about the number of years of formal education and numbers of years as a teacher). Clarification was given. Without exception, principals were happy and enthusiastic to engage in a discussion about education and to give their opinions. Perhaps, conducting the interview portion of the research during the summer months was perfect. Doing them during the school year would likely cause principals to feel more stressed because of the demand on their time.

The formal discussion began with the researcher thanking the principal for their time, willingness to participate in the study, and to share their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with the interviewer. The questions were then asked as indicated in Appendix C. When the interview concluded many principals indicated that they wanted to see a report or presentation of the results of the study, indicating their continued interest in the study. Additionally, principals continue to ask the researcher how the project is going and when will it be finished so they can see the results.
**Step 4: Transcription**

The demographic questionnaire was given to the interviewee at the beginning of each interview session and collected by the interviewer before the interview began. The data from the demographic questionnaire was entered into an Excel spreadsheet within 48 hours of the interview. The coding for the first interview began within 72 hours of the completion of the interview. As more interviews were coded, the researcher continually returned to previous interviews to adjust coding structure and technique as coding evolved. This served as a constant refining process until the last interview was transcribed and coded. This coding routine served as the system for constant-comparative coding.

The episodic interviews were transcribed by a research assistant within 48 hours of the interview, uploaded to computer, and stored in NVivo12 (QRS International, 2020) on the researcher’s office computer. These files were backed-up daily using an external hard drive that was taken home, as well as email files to self from two different email companies. All storage methods were password protected using a typical Windows password system. No person had access to this information except the researchers. The transcriptionists signed a non-disclosure agreement (kept on file by researcher) before beginning transcription work.

**Step 5: Data Refinement**

The transcription Word documents were sent from the hired transcriptionist electronically. Each interview participant and school were given pseudonyms that replaced the actual names on the Word document. To protect against data loss and theft, the files were then immediately saved to a password protected computer, saved on an external hard (kept in a locked office), and emailed to two separate accounts.
The researcher also carefully read each interview and replaced names of people and schools, mentioned during the interview, with pseudonyms so that no identifiable information could be extracted.

The demographic data from the questionnaires was entered into a previously created MS Excel spreadsheet. The same pseudonyms used for the transcriptions were used in the Excel spreadsheet, relative to each participant and school. The demographic data was used in the qualitative analysis. Randomly selected transcription files were read while listening to the audio recording to check the accuracy of the transcriptionists work.

Transcriptions were stored in NVivo as case nodes, which were used for the beginning (open coding) phase. The demographic data was imported to NVivo from an Excel spreadsheet and used in the second (axial) and third (selective) phases of coding. The researcher included at least two external reviews. The first analyzed the ETIC coding node structure. The second review checked the fidelity of actual codes that have been completed. Acceptable quality of coding was determined when the external reviewers had 75% agreement with the researchers original coding. This ensured coding reliability. If this standard had not been met, then the researcher would have revised the coding criteria to be more specific so that was less judgmental variation.

An external review was used to refine the data to ensure that data was entered appropriately, and coding structure and actual coding was accurate. In my use of the constant comparative approach, the researcher would sometimes see something that triggered a question. In the event, the researcher would then check to see what other researchers said on the topic.
Step 6: Coding Phases of Data Analysis

**Phase 1: Open Coding (Data Familiarization).** Coding can be thought of as a triangle divided into three sections with base at the bottom and the apex at the top. The base section we could call, open coding; the middle section, axial coding; and the top portion, selective coding.

Moghaddam (2006) explains that in the beginning the coding process is “unfocused and open.” Goulding (1999) explains that open coding assists us in lysing interviews into categories to make sense of the information. Open coding is the initial attempt to group interview statements. Goulding (1999) indicated that dozens to hundreds of codes may appear. A grounded theory researcher will constantly review former codes looking for themes, new codes, and comparisons. Goulding (1999) lists four questions that need to be continually asked during the open coding phase.

1. What is the data saying?
2. What is the basic socio-psychological problem?
3. What accounts for it?
4. What patterns are emerging?

The data in NVivo was initially coded using full transcripts based on the ETIC coding structure that is included in Appendix E. This gave the researcher a very simplistic coding organization to begin. The codes created were useful based on my memory of particular words, phrases, and concepts while conducting the interviews. Once the first phase of coding began, coding was constantly adjusted using the constant-comparative analysis approach (Star, 1998). This slowly shifted the coding structure from a thematic ETIC model to a more EMIC (data-driven) structure. This allowed the researcher to see more themes and explore patterns. As the
coding shifted to a more emic structure, more patterns and themes emerged than anticipated. Initially, it was uncertain just how different the emic structure would be from the etic model.

This coding/analysis included comparisons between various demographic data (imported from Microsoft Excel 365 to NVivo) of the principals being interviewed (sex, level of school, age, ethnicity, and years as principal, etc.). This happened during phase one of coding as the researcher became familiar with the transcripts. During open coding as the researcher continually returned to previously coded transcripts, many codes were revised, refined, and adjusted the coding accordingly. Many nodes were deleted, added, rearranged, renamed, or merged as coding evolved. This process of developing new codes, nodes, sub nodes, and themes is called, “constant comparative procedure” (Creswell, 2002; Glaser et al., 1968) call it “constant comparative method (Moghaddam, 2006). Saturation was reached based on a subjective decision that the researcher made when he determined that no new themes or patterns emerged (Creswell, 2002). During the open phase of coding a threshold was set when 75% of principals mentioned a theme. Below is a list of codes that met this standard after Phase 1 and 2.

**Phase 2: Axial Coding (Theme Identification and Review).** The middle section of the triangle is more targeted than open coding. During this phase of coding, the researcher began to look for general themes and patterns. The number of codes were reduced by combining others that were very similar and showed a relationship between them. New codes were created, and some former codes renamed. The purpose was to start-making sense of the numerous open codes. When a core concept was identified we explored its parameters on a deeper level, trying to find the strengths and weakness of the concept itself. As Goulding (1999) explained, core concepts united open coding nodes to explain the thoughts and ideas of those being studied. Furthermore, axial coding was the process used for gathering fractured codes and reassembling
them into patterns that began to make sense of them. It was the beginning stages of creating our theory and model which explained the phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

We used Moghaddam’s (2006) ideas to refine coding. His steps were to identify four things that happen during axial coding: constantly relate child nodes to parent nodes (categories), comparing emerging parent nodes to others, increasing density of parent nodes by describing their attributes and boundaries, exploring the scope of the variations that may exist in the theory.

The following outline created by Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 147), was used to identify a core category (theory):

1. It must be core; all subcategories relate to it.
2. It must be observed often during the data collection (interviews) and referenced by nearly every data source.
3. The emerging theory must make logical sense and data not forced to fit.
4. As the theory is developed and combined with more data, it should grow in its power to explain phenomena.
5. The central theory can explain variations just as well as non-variations.

During this phase in the study, the researcher looked for relationships between nodes, searched for themes, and possible relationships between themes (patterns). New themes, sub-themes, and broader themes emerged, enriching the analysis (see Appendix F).

**Phase 3: Selective Coding (Theme Refinement).** The apex of the triangle is called selective coding. During this phase of coding the foundation for the grounded theory was created and developed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Moghaddam, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1990) define selective coding as, “the process of selecting the central or core category [theory], systematically
relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further development” (p. 116).

In the study several core theories (themes) emerged. The larger set of themes was narrowed to a “selective” few. The researcher looked for enough coherent evidence to support each theme, possible overlaps of themes, and those that needed to be split into separate themes. Additionally, in this phase the themes were clearly identified and defined (Appendix G).

Because a constant-comparative analysis approach happened throughout the process, data refinement occurred constantly. There were three rounds of selective coding. In round one, the codes generated in the axial coding phase were maneuvered to create more vivid theme identification. The inclusion threshold then increased to 75%. This made the theme more powerful and robust in its ability to explain phenomena (Appendix E). During round two of selective coding, data was compared against the following attributes (sex, level of school, ethnicity, school poverty level, years as administrator, years as teacher, etc.) (Appendix F). During round three, emergent themes from round one and round two were compared with each other along with various additional attributes. This process unearthed interesting and powerfully rooted themes (Appendix G).
APPENDIX C

Research Instruments

Phone Script to Recruit for Personal Episodic Interviews

Hello, may I speak with __________________________ (principal’s name)? Hi, (principal’s name) this is Buck Ekstrom from ____________________ Elementary. I am calling to see if I can interview you for my doctoral research project. I am interviewing principals in our district about their perceptions regarding education. Specifically, to find out what you think are the biggest successes and challenges in education today. The interview should take 15 – 30 minutes. Can I schedule a time to meet with you at your school? Let me verify your email address so that I can send you a calendar invite.

Thank you (principal’s name). I look forward to seeing you for the interview at ________ (time and day).
Demographic Questionnaire for School Leaders

Date: ______________________

First Name: ______________ Last Name: ______________

1. What is your gender?
   □ Male
   □ Female

2. What is your age?
   □ 20-35 years old
   □ 36-50 years old
   □ 51 years and over

3. What is your marital status?
   □ Single (never married)
   □ Married
   □ Separated
   □ Widowed
   □ Divorced

4. What is your ethnicity/race? (Please check all that apply)
   □ White/Caucasian
   □ American Indian/Native American
   □ Alaskan Native
   □ Black/African American
   □ Asian/Asian American
   □ Hispanic/Latino
   □ Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander
   □ Other. Please specify: ________________________________

5. How many years of formal education have you completed?
   ________ (Actual number, including 12 years for elementary through high school)

   Continued on back →→→

6. What is the highest university degree you hold?
   □ Bachelor’s degree
   □ Master’s degree
   □ Education Specialist

______________________________

7. What is the level of your school of current assignment?
   □ Elementary School
   □ Junior High/Middle School
   □ High School

8. How many years have you **completed** as a public-school teacher prior to becoming an assistant principal (or full-time TSA\(^2\), or similar) or principal? _______ (Actual number)

9. How many years have you **completed** as a public-school assistant principal (include years as an intern)? _______ (Actual number, all schools combined)

10. How many years have you **completed** as a public-school principal? _______ (Actual number, all schools combined)

11. How many years have you **completed** as a public-school principal at current school? _______ (Actual number, current school only)

12. How many students attend your school? (Actual number) __________

13. Percentage of students on Free/Reduced lunch in your school _______ 

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\(^2\) TSA (teacher on special assignment). These types of positions are those where you have the responsibilities of an assistant principal, but are still being paid as a teacher.
Interview Questions for School Leaders

(30 April 2014 version)

In the interview for this research, the following nine questions may be asked to the school leaders to elicit the necessary information on the basic construct under study. Each principal may take several minutes to reflect before answering.

Question #1: Describe an example of what you consider to be the biggest problem or challenge confronting your school.

NOTE: Write down a few “reminder words” for the challenge the respondent identifies:

_______________________________________________________________________

Question #2: What other instances and/or examples of this problem or challenge of ____________ [use words from the NOTE above], can you describe for me?

Question #3: When you have meetings, or talk with other school leaders in your district, what do they mention or talk about as the biggest problem or challenge at their school?

Question #4: Now, stepping back from all these detailed examples (your own, and those from other leaders), let’s think about this in a more “abstract” way. To you, what is the abstract definition of a problem or challenge in education? That is, without using specific examples, how would you abstractly define what an “educational problem” or an “educational challenge” is?

Question #5: Considering the definition you just provided, WHY do you believe that ______________ [use words from the NOTE about in question #1] is the “biggest” or “most important” problem or challenge at your school?

Question #6: If somehow, we could make the problem or challenge of ______________ [use words from the NOTE about in question #1] somehow “disappear,” what would be the next largest challenge or problem at your school?

Question #7: We’ve been discussing challenges and problems, but there are certainly many great successes in education. What are some of the successes that you have seen in education?

Question #8: What are the successes or achievements at your school that would you like people to know about?

Question #9: If you had all ears and eyes of the legislature for 2 minutes, what would you say to them?

The first five questions are episodic in nature, while the last two are questions added to allow the principal the opportunity to expand on their thinking (#6), and to give the principal to provide positive information about their school ending on a positive note (#7). The types of episodic information the first five are exploring are, in order: Situation, narratives, repisodes, examples, subjective definitions, argumentative-theoretical statements (see page 62-63 in Flick, U. (2008). Designing qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE; Flick, U. (1997a); Flick, U. (1997b). The episodic interview: Small scale narratives as approach to relevant experiences. Discussion Papers – Qualitative Series. London School of Economics Methodology Institute. London).
APPENDIX D

Institutional Review Board Approval

April 9, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

[Redacted] has interest in Buck Ekstrom's research entitled, "Public K-12 Building Principals' Perspectives on the Greatest Challenges and Successes in American Education." We look forward to receiving additional details about his work.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

Assessment Supervisor
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS

Memorandum

To: Scott Ferrin, Ph.D.
Department: EDLF
College: EDUC
From: Renee Nix, IRB Administrator
Date: April 26, 2018
IRB#: A 18-238
Subject: Understanding K-12 Principals’ Perspectives on Successes and Challenges Facing Schools in One Utah School District

The protocol referenced in the subject heading has been reviewed by Brigham Young University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects (IRB). The IRB has determined that this scholarly activity does not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research 45 CFR 46.102(f).

Most research in the social and behavioral sciences involves gathering information about individuals. However, this research will involve the collection of data from building principals—educational professionals. The professional will contribute information about some aspect of the external world primarily from the perspective of their special expertise, rather than their personal opinions, preferences, perceptions or experiences.

Please remove BYU IRB’s contact information from the consent statement.

Sincerely,

Renee A. Nix, MPA
Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, Administrator
Office of Research & Creative Activities
Brigham Young University
A-285 ASB Campus Drive
Provo, UT 84602
Ph: 801-422-1461 | http://cora.byu.edu/irb/
Understanding Public K-12 Building Principals’ Perspectives on the
Greatest Successes and Challenges in American Education

Informed Consent

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Name: Buck Ekstrom (801-402-1802)
Department: Educational Leadership and Foundation - BYU

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Name: Scott Ferrin
Department: Educational Leadership and Foundation - BYU

Purpose of the study

Research needs to be conducted on the perspectives of K-12 traditional public-school building principals regarding what they say are the most significant challenges and successes in American K-12 education today. This will provide policymakers with critical information so that the Utah State Legislature can make better-informed decisions.

Background / Literature Review / Rationale for the study

In the literature, there is little information about the general perspectives of K-12 traditional public-school building principals regarding the biggest challenges and successes in American education. The Phi Delta Kappa organization has conducted research on these topics by administering a survey to the general American public for the last 50+ years. The researcher has found minimal such research in which traditional K-12 public school principals were asked about their general perspectives with reference to challenges and
successes in American education. Principals are in a unique boundary spanning position and understand many sides of various educational issues. They boundary span between parents and teachers, teachers and students, the school and the district office, the community, and the school. Principals also collaborate with other school principals; therefore, they also understand the experiences of many schools. A wealth of knowledge and experience because of this boundary spanning work is going untapped. Legislators must understand building-level leaders’ perspectives on these issues. Lobbyists, superintendents’ associations, etc. will have more knowledge to influence legislators.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The target population is all K-12 traditional public-school principals in Utah. The accessible population is all the K-12 traditional public-school principals in Davis District schools.

The sample will be comprised by implementing a stratified random sampling (SRS) of 24, K-12 traditional public-school principals in the Davis School District. Based on the following criteria: Sex: male/female, Race: ethnic minority or not ethnic minority, Title I or Non-Title I, Level of school (primary or secondary), Age: 25 – 65 years of age, Years as a principal

The following populations are excluded from the study: Adults unable to consent/Cognitively Impaired, Individuals who are not yet adults (under 18 years of age), Pregnant women (where the activities of the research may affect the pregnancy or the fetus), Prisoners or other detained individuals.
Sample Size

24 principals

Research Locations

Each principal’s office.

What should I know about a research study?

- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.

Procedures Involved

The demographic questionnaire will be given to the interviewee at the beginning of each interview session and collected by the interviewer before the interview begins. The data from the demographic questionnaire will be entered into an Excel spreadsheet within 48 hours of the interview. The coding for the first interview will begin within 72 hours of the completion of the interview. As more interviews are coded, the researcher will continually return to previous interviews to adjust coding structure and technique as coding evolves. This will serve as a constant refining process until the last interview is transcribed and coded. This coding routine will serve as the system for constant-comparative coding.

An external review will be used to scrub the data to ensure that data has been entered appropriately and coding structure and actual coding is accurate. At least two members of the researcher’s doctoral cohort (yet to be selected) will complete the external review audit.
The episodic interviews will be transcribed by a research assistant (yet to be hired) within 48 hours of the interview, uploaded to computer, and stored in NVivo12 (QSR International, 2020) on the researcher’s office computer. These files will be backed-up daily using an external hard drive that will be taken home, as well as email files to self from two different email companies. All storage methods are password protected using a typical Windows password system. No person will have access to this information except the researcher. The transcriptionists will sign a non-disclosure agreement (kept on file by researcher) before beginning transcription work.

Transcriptions will be stored in NVivo as case nodes, which will be used for the beginning (open coding) phase. The demographic data will be imported to NVivo from an Excel spreadsheet and used in the second (axial) and third (selective) phases of coding. The researcher will include at least two external reviews. The first will be to analyze the ETIC coding node structure. The second review will check the fidelity of actual codes that have been completed. Acceptable quality of coding will be determined when the external reviewers have 75% agreement with the researchers original coding. This will ensure coding reliability. If this standard is not met, then the researcher will revise the coding criteria to be more specific so that there is less judgmental variation.

**Recruitment Methods**

Principal will be recruited via a telephone script that I will read to them asking for their participation in the study.
Consent Process

If you say “Yes, you want to be in this research,” here is what you will do.

During the interview, I will ask you questions about successes and challenges in education. This interview will be audio-recorded so that the study team may later transcribe the interview. Audio-recording is mandatory to participation. If you do not agree to be audio-recorded, then you cannot participate in this research study. The audio recording will be stored on the researcher’s phone and password protected computer. The audio recordings will be deleted after the transcriptions have been verified to be accurate (usually within two weeks). The only persons that will have access to the audio recordings are the researchers and the transcriptionist.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research or if I say “Yes”, but I change my mind later?

You can decide not to participate in this research or you can start and then decide to leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. To do so, simply exit the survey. Any data already collected will not be saved.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Every effort will be made to conceal any identifiable information, limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study.

A random character name generator will be used to create pseudonyms for the interviewees. http://character.namegeneratorfun.com/

I used a list of mountains in Utah and Alaska to create pseudonymous for the schools from Wikipedia. The two websites used were
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mountain_peaks_of_Utah (List of Mountain Peaks in Utah, 2019) and

The episodic interviews will be transcribed (from an audio recording) by a research assistant (yet to be hired) within 48 hours of the interview, uploaded to computer, and stored in NVivo on the researcher’s office computer. These files (audio and transcription) will be backed-up daily using an external hard drive that will be taken home, as well as email files to self from two different email companies. All storage methods are password protected using a typical Windows password system. No person will have access to this information except the researcher. The transcriptionists will sign a non-disclosure agreement (kept on file by researcher) before beginning transcription work.

Transcriptions will be stored in NVivo as case nodes, which will be used for the beginning (open coding) phase. The demographic data will be imported to NVivo from an Excel spreadsheet and used in the second (axial) and third (selective) phases of coding.

**Who can I talk to?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints talk to the Principal Investigator.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the District Assessment Department. You may talk to them at [redacted].
• Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.

• You cannot reach the research team.

• You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

• You have questions about your rights as a research participant.

• You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Consent**

If you want a copy of this consent for your records, you can ask the research team for a copy.

**Potential Benefits to Participants**

There will be no direct benefit to participants.

**Risks to Participants**

The only reasonably foreseeable risks, discomfts, hazards, or inconveniences related to the participants’ participation in the research are related to the 30-minute interview. The interviewers see no foreseeable hazards or risks.

**Provisions to Protect Privacy and Confidentiality of Participants and the Research Data**

All data will be kept completely secure and private.
I Do _____ Do Not _____ Consent to participate in this research titled:

Understanding Public K-12 Building Principals’ Perspectives on the Greatest Successes and Challenges in American Education

Conducted by Buck Ekstrom

________________________
Printed Name

________________________
Signature
APPENDIX E

Open Coding Structure and Themes

1. Biggest Successes
   a. Attendance
   b. Caring Educators
   c. Do a lot with low funds
      i. School land trust funds
   d. Educate all students
   e. Good programs & high standards
   f. Graduation rates
   g. Leadership quality
   h. Meet student poverty needs
   i. Public perceptions
   j. Reasons
   k. School culture
      i. Collaboration – PLCs
      ii. Dedicated teachers
   l. Soft skills – resilience etc.
   m. Special education students
   n. Student success and results
   o. Technology access
   p. Variety of classes offered

2. Challenges Definition
   a. What is a challenge
   b. How to deal with a challenge

3. Greatest Challenges
   a. Apathy
   b. Attendance
   c. Class size
   d. Climate of school
   e. Collaboration – PLC
   f. Communication
   g. District officials
      i. Legislature
   h. Environmental pressures
   i. Equity issues
   j. Facilities
   k. Focus (lack of)
   l. Funding
      i. Charter schools
      ii. Resources
iii. Salaries
iv. Vouchers
m. Improvement programs
  i. Special educations
n. Mentoring
o. Parents
  i. Helicopter
  ii. Low commitment to education
p. Perceptions
  i. Feeling overwhelmed
  ii. Media influence
  iii. Not feeling valued
    1. Trust the teacher
q. Principal role
  i. Autonomy
r. Quality instruction
  i. Immersion program
  ii. Personalized
  iii. Quality teachers
  iv. Teacher complacency
    v. Technology – digital and blended learning
s. Safety
t. SES (socio-economic status)
u. Standardized testing
v. Student behavior
w. Student needs
  i. At-Risk students
  ii. Basic food, clothes, shelter
  iii. Emotional
  iv. Student achievement
    1. Student engagement
    v. Student variety
x. Teacher retention

4. Legislature
  a. Come visit
  b. Funding
    i. Mental health
c. Make public education a priority
d. Recruitment of teachers
e. Thank the legislature
f. Trust us
APPENDIX F

Axial Coding Themes

1. Biggest Successes
   a. Academic Success and Results
      i. New Initiatives
   b. Culture & Quality of School
      i. Good programs – high standards

2. Challenges Definition
   a. What is a challenge
   b. How to deal with a challenge

3. Greatest Challenges
   a. DPBL (Digital Personalized Blended Learning)
      i. 21st Century learning
      ii. Blended learning
      iii. Digital technology
      iv. Increased achievement
      v. Personalized
      vi. Standards based
   b. Funding
      i. In General
      ii. Class size
      iii. Clubs and activities
      iv. Equity and access
      v. Facilities
      vi. Resources
      vii. Salaries
      viii. Support staff
      ix. Technology
      x. Vouchers
   c. Immersion programs
   d. Lack of focus
      i. Too many initiatives
      ii. Vision is inconsistent
   e. Low commitment to education
      i. Attendance and graduation
      ii. Cultural factors
      iii. Family dysfunction
      iv. Parent low support
         1. Parent apathy
         2. Parent education or lack of support
   f. Pressures
i. Community
ii. District
iii. Legislature
iv. Media
v. Parents
   1. Helicopter
   2. Lawnmower
g. Principal role
   i. Leadership
   ii. Autonomy
   iii. Principals huge load
      1. Not enough time
   iv. Climate
      1. PLC
      2. Principal sets the climate
h. Safety
i. Societal issues
j. Student needs
   i. At-Risk students
   ii. Basic food, clothes, shelter
   iii. Educate 100% of kids
      1. Meet all their needs
   iv. ELL
   v. Mental health (Social Emotional Learning)
      1. Resilience
      2. Social media
   vi. Socio-economic status
      1. mobility
   vii. Special education
   viii. Student discipline
      1. Sex, drugs, alcohol
   ix. Student engagement low
  x. Student achievement low
 xi. Student variety
k. Teachers
   i. Apathy
      1. Apprehension to change
      2. Bad attitude
      3. Buy-in
      4. Complacency
      5. Disgruntled
   ii. Feeling overwhelmed
   iii. Recruitment or retention of teachers
iv. Teaching quality / skills
   1. Mentoring
      l. Testing
         i. Test targets keep moving
         ii. General concerns

4. Legislature
   a. Value us
      i. Come visit my school
      ii. Trust us

5. Sentiment
   a. Negative
   b. Positive
   c. Overwhelmed
APPENDIX G

Selective Coding Themes

1. Biggest Successes
   a. Academic Success and Results (with new initiatives)
   b. Culture & Quality of School (good program – high standards)

2. Challenges Definition
   a. What is a challenge
   b. How to deal with a challenge

3. Greatest Challenges
   a. DPBL (Digital Personalized Blended Learning)
   b. Funding (class size, equity and access, resources, and salaries)
   c. Low commitment to education (parent support, student engagement, attendance, and graduation)
   d. Pressures (community, district, parents)
   e. Principals role (leadership, huge load, school climate-culture)
   f. Student needs (physical, emotional, ELL, poverty, SEL, SPED)
   g. Teachers (Apathy, feeling devalued and overwhelmed, recruitment, and skills)
   h. Testing

4. Legislature
   a. Value us (come visit and trust us)
   b. Thank you

5. Sentiment
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