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A Phenomenological Study of High School Principals' Crucible Leadership Experiences

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A Phenomenological Study of High School Principals' Crucible Leadership Experiences

By

Gregory Stephen Martin

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF
EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND COUNSELING OF THE UNIVERSITY OF

ST. THOMAS

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2017

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

A Phenomenological Study of High School Principals' Crucible Leadership Experiences

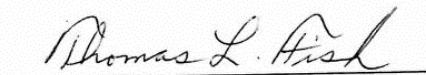
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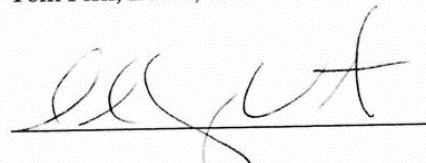
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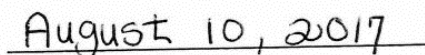
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ABSTRACT

This study examined crucible leadership experiences of high school principals. Utilizing a qualitative and phenomenological approach, the study investigated how 17 Minnesota high school principals with five plus years of experience navigated their most difficult leadership experiences to emerge stronger and more confident in their leadership capacity. Participants reported stories from two categories: New Principal Problems (first three years) and Sooner or Later Problems (any time throughout a career). Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2000) was used to interpret the results and categorize the stories based on Mezirow's four phases of transformational learning: (1) elaborating existing frames of reference; (2) learning new frames of reference; (3) transforming points of view; and (4) transforming habits of mind. Difficult situations required participants to resist their existing assumptions, beliefs, and prior life experiences to transform their habits of mind. To fully grasp the learning occurring during these experiences, principals engaged in critical reflection, dialogue, and risk taking. These powerful stories may help aspiring principals and veteran school leaders as they continue to grapple with an ever-changing society in the 21st century.

Keywords: Crucible experiences, principals, transformational learning, transformational leadership

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The quality of education American students receive continues to be a point of discussion and concern. To meet the needs of students and staff in a rapidly evolving society, principals bear increased responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning taking place in their schools, and the effects of their leadership on faculty and students. Elected officials agree with this view based on recently new legislation requiring principal evaluation. In 2011, the Minnesota House of Representatives enacted the Principal Accountability Law (Minn. Stat. § 123B.143, subd. 1; § 123B.147, subd. 3), requiring every superintendent to use a performance-based system to annually evaluate school principals. The evaluation process improves teaching and learning by enhancing the principal's ability to shape school performance, student achievement, and teacher effectiveness (Larson, 2012).

Due to high principal turnover, the least experienced principals serve in the most challenging and underachieving schools (University Council for Educational Administration [UCEA], 2008). "After five years, less than one-half of newly hired middle school principals remained, and only 39 % of high school principals" (p. 1). Concerns around student achievement, principal effectiveness, and sustainability raise questions about how principals prepare to take on these important leadership positions, and navigate new and challenging experiences occurring throughout their careers. Because principals face many challenges, such as increased accountability for student achievement and pressure to perform with increased oversight, I decided to investigate how veteran or seasoned principals learn from difficult experiences, and presumably use the knowledge and wisdom gained from these experiences to become more effective school leaders.

My three years of teaching middle and high school provided me with an opportunity to learn about effective instruction, including ways to raise student achievement and collaborate with my colleagues. However, after two years serving as a dean of students, and my recent experience as an assistant principal, I see the work of lead principals and the risks associated with this position, and wish to learn more. I never imagined the many challenges faced by principals and the steep learning curve needed to survive and thrive in this role.

During my limited time as an administrator, new situations occurred, revealing my lack of experience. In these situations I turned to more experienced colleagues for advice and support and benefited from their guidance through these difficult leadership situations. Even though I realize these learning opportunities made me a better leader, I felt weak, vulnerable, and exposed. I wish to learn and help others benefit from the experiences of seasoned principals as they navigate difficult “crucible” experiences throughout their career.

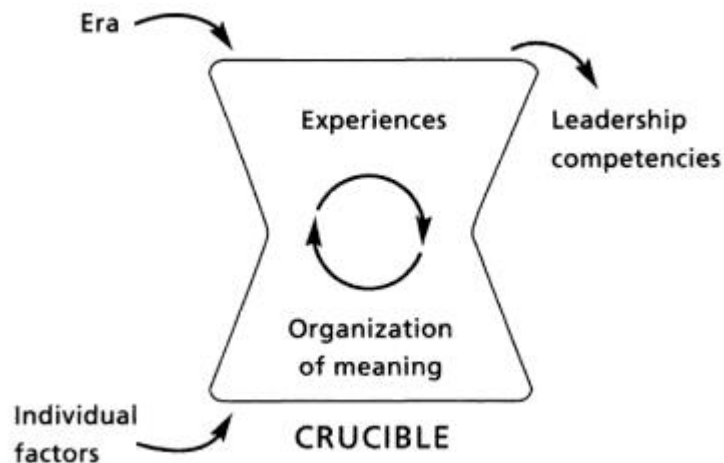
I adopted the term “crucible” in this study to describe the experiences that become a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forces a leader to question their moral compass and what matters to them. It requires individuals to examine their values, question their assumptions, hone their judgment and, hopefully, emerge from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose—changed in some fundamental way (Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

According to Thomas (2008), the term crucible comes from the medieval times when alchemists used vessels to convert metals to gold. Today, chemists use crucibles to withstand high temperatures without changing the composition within the container. The heat applied to the outside of the container changes the composition of the content inside without altering the container itself. In relation to present day leadership, crucibles represent fiery trials that

encompass transformative experiences (Thomas, 2008). Not all crucibles impact people in the same way: they vary in texture, duration, and, most importantly, the lessons learned. Crucible experiences transform individuals to a new level of understanding and mastery of their leadership, changing leaders from the inside out.

The process of identifying a crucible starts when specific experiences and organizational meaning collide (see Figure 1). Individual factors cause people to contemplate what action they will take to resolve the conflict. If handled successfully, leaders become stronger after facing adversity and managing their way through discomfort.

Figure 1: *Leadership Development Model*



(Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 4)

A crucible experience exists outside the range of normal experience, and may become a transformative experience when individuals come to a new or an altered sense of identity. Through the experience, the leader gains a clearer vision of their moral compass and how they plan to lead in the future (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Crucible experiences also have been called defining moments (Bennis & Thomas, 2002), trigger events (Janson, 2008), critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954), significant emotional events (Massey, 1979), distorting dilemmas (Mezirow,

1975), or struggles (Dolitch, 2005; Khaleelee & Woolf, 1996; Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005). These experiences become opportunities for inspired action and personal growth (Nietzsche, 1954). The impact can be explained as a disruption in the cycle of meaning and our view of the world (Goss, 1996; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; O'Connor, 1998). When the cycle gets interrupted by a crucible experience, a breakthrough in awareness occurs resulting in clarity (Massey, 1979), offers freedom to accept total responsibility and to create an extraordinary future (Goss, 1996). This creates authentic leadership more grounded and intentional (Kipp, 1999).

These experiences cause value systems to shift (Divita, 1994). Value systems (Collins, 2001; Kegan, 1982) show a hierarchy starting out with base instincts, such as survival and extend toward selfless service at the highest level. Crucible experiences provide an opportunity for values to shift consistently with the progression along these value system hierarchies.

This study benefits novice and experienced principals because the knowledge learned reveals how principals process, perform, and learn in challenging situations. Effective principals continue to learn throughout their career (Lambert, 1998). I hope eager and excited novice principals learn strategies to navigate difficult leadership situations without jeopardizing their roles and reputations.

Statement of the Problem, Purpose, and Significance

Principals become more effective as they gain experience (Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Just like teachers, principals make significant improvement in their first few years in a leadership role, and then make more modest improvements in the following years (Clark, Martorell & Rockoff, 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012). Furthermore, no matter how effective at their previous

school, when principals transfer to a new school it takes approximately five years to fully stabilize and improve the teaching staff as well as fully implement policies and practices to positively impact the school's performance (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Principals continually face new challenges in their careers, and benefit from the knowledge and wisdom learned from colleagues.

The purpose of my study is to identify the crucible leadership challenges experienced by seasoned principals, and learn how they navigated those challenges to emerge stronger leaders. By identifying the experiences and leadership skills necessary to thrive in the principal position, aspiring and veteran principals can learn from the experience of others and avoid costly mistakes.

Principal leadership is more important now than ever because of accountability (UCEA, 2008). Principals remain second only to teachers in their impact on student achievement (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) found highly effective principals increased student achievement scores up to 10 percentage points on standardized tests in just one year. However, poorly prepared principals, or those not receiving support, lacked the knowledge and skills needed to successfully manage and learn from crucible leadership experiences. The broad theories of leadership, school management and short-internships experienced by most aspiring principals may not fully prepare them before they receive a job offer for this important leadership position. When a unique and challenging situation occurs, principals may lack the knowledge or experience needed to meet the demands of the situation. This puts principals in a tough spot. They might try to operate by the book and make the situation go away instead of leading with values, vision, and confidence. More research on what crucible experiences look, sound, and feel like may help novice and even experienced principals

face pivotal leadership situations with greater awareness of the leadership challenges and strategies needed to thrive in this difficult role.

Research Questions

I adopted the following question to guide my study: How do high school principals experience and make meaning from “crucible” leadership experiences? I added the following three sub-questions to further define my area of inquiry:

1. What types of crucible experiences represented a significant leadership challenge?
2. How do participants describe the experience, and its effects on their leadership?
3. How do crucible experiences affect principal perceptions and changes in their leadership, particularly concerning their interactions and work with members of the school and community?

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One introduces the research topic and addresses the problem, purpose, and significance of this study. Chapter Two contains a thorough review of literature surrounding principal preparation programs and how principals experience learning throughout their careers. In addition, chapter two identifies tensions and gaps in the literature this study was designed to address, while tying in theoretical frameworks. Chapter Three describes the phenomenological qualitative methodology used in this study. Furthermore, chapter three outlines the Institutional Review Board process, the safeguards established to protect participants, and a description of the semi-structured interview format. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the participant selection process and a description of the methods employed in the analysis. Chapter Four and Five describe the 34 stories told by experienced principals that articulated their crucible leadership experiences. Chapter Six analyzes the data shared through the lens of Jack Mezirow’s

transformational learning theory (2000). Chapter Seven summarizes the results of the study, describes limitations and possible future research, and concludes with the importance of life-long learning and the impact of networking on a career.

Definition of Terms

I adopted the following terms and definitions for my study:

Crucible Experiences: Bennis and Thomas (2002) found crucible experiences to be a “trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced [leaders] to question their leadership and what mattered to them. It required them to examine their values, question their assumptions, and hone their judgment. And, invariably, they emerged from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose—changed in some fundamental way” (p. 4).

Experienced Principal vs. Novice Principal: For the sake of this study “experienced principal” means anyone who has served in a lead principal position for more than three years. “Novice principal” will be anyone who has served less than three years as a lead principal.

Frames of Reference: Mezirow (1997) refers to frames of reference as "the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings" (p. 5).

Habits of Mind: In this study, I define habits of mind as pre-existing preferences on how to act in a situation based on previous experiences and decisions.

Meaning Perspective: Mezirow (1991) defines meaning perspectives as “broad sets of predispositions resulting from psychocultural assumptions which determine the horizons of our expectations” (p. 161).

Preparation Program: In this study, I define a principal preparation program as “a state-accredited program of study that fully or partially prepares educators for certification as a school principal” (Yoder, Freed, & Fetters, 2014, p. 1).

Transformational Learning: “The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1991, p.8)

Transformational Leadership: In this study, transformational leadership refers to transforming personal and group mindsets, while inspiring action for positive change.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To increase student achievement and close the achievement gap, schools need effective principal leaders (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). The quality of training principals receive before they assume their positions and the continued professional development they gain throughout their careers influences whether school leaders can meet the increasingly tough expectations of the principal position.

I adopted the following question to guide my literature review: how do principals adapt and grow in a quickly evolving society and what challenges do they face? I organized my review findings into the following themes: (1) historical and contemporary roles and responsibilities of high school principals, (2) principals as leaders, (3) principal preparation programs (4) principal development, (5) principal challenges and frustrations, and (6) leadership growth through lived and crucible experiences.

The early history of the principalship includes a timeline of how the principal role has evolved over time. The literature concerning principals as leaders focuses on the definition and impact of principals, while examining effective principal behaviors. The literature on preparation programs identifies a historic timeline for implementation of preparation programs in the United States and identifies the challenges institutions face including all of the essential elements of successful certification. The literature on principal development reviews why and how principals continue to learn throughout their careers and the effectiveness of the different methods. Furthermore, the literature on principal challenges and frustrations identifies the setbacks principals experience on the job. The last section on leadership growth identifies literature on how leaders learn through experience.

Historical and Contemporary Roles and Responsibilities of High School Principals

The role of high school principals has evolved from a one-room school teacher to a complex leadership position (Rousmaniere, 2013). According to Rousmaniere the first grammar schools in the United States opened in the 1630s in Boston, Massachusetts. However, the first principal appointment took place much later in the mid-1830s. In the first 200 years of education in the United States the teachers or head teacher managed the day-to-day operations of a school, while the county or district superintendent handled school discipline and instructional supervision.

The Industrial Revolution (1760-1820) caused student populations on the east coast to grow and superintendents lacked time to fulfill all of their supervisory requirements: thus head teachers became principals (Rousmaniere, 2013). During the 1800s, principals received no formalized training. The teacher who displayed the best disciplinarian, instructional, and physical skills received the appointment to the position of principal (Shuster, 1973). In 1839, The Cincinnati Board of Education described the following duties of a master (principal): (a) to function as the head of the school, (b) to regulate the classes and course of instruction of all pupils, (c) to maintain a safe and clean environment, and (d) to give necessary instruction to his assistants (Pierce, 1935).

In the early 1900s no higher education institutions offered principal or leadership development programs (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals received training through on-the-job experiences. Moral character and a sound general education became the primary qualifications for an appointment to a principalship during this time. By the mid-1930s, the idea of communities needing to be informed about the practices within schools became prevalent (Hencley, McCleary & McGrath, 1970). In the 1940s and 1950s, a survey of school

administrators indicated high school principals would be better prepared to face the challenges of their jobs if the current needs of students, staff, and community aligned with a preparatory program (Shuster, 1973).

Sergiovanni (1995) found by 1955 The American Association of School Administrators added “stimulating staff” and “evaluating teachers” to the list of principal responsibilities. In addition, certain competencies correlated to success for school principals. These competencies included such traits as communication skills, curriculum knowledge, and leadership behaviors.

In the early 1980s the Effective Schools research began to shift the role of a principal from a building manager to an instructional leader (Leithwood, 1988). Principals led instructional improvement through hands-on approaches, but as Greenfield (1982) pointed out, the idea of the principal as an instructional leader increasingly conflicted with the pressures to be an operational manager.

During the end of the twentieth century, schools and principals became more accountable for the performance of students on state and national assessments. Principals focused on teaching and learning, monitoring and assisting teachers as they improved their ability to teach students (Rousmaniere, 2013). Principals could no longer just manage the school; a principal needed to lead effective implementations to increase student achievement. Hargreaves, Moore, and Manning (2001) surveyed administrators and found the focus of principals shifted to being leaders of the whole school, and supporting the intellectual and emotional work of teachers. Sergiovanni (1995) argued principals needed to avoid thinking about what works, and instead shift to thinking about how to improve student learning. As the principal’s role continued to take on new responsibility “instructional leadership” became the focus area for school administrators.

In the 21st century new accountability measures established by school boards and government agencies such as *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and *The Student Success Act of 2015* emphasized the role of the principal as an instructional leader. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) found increased accountability created additional responsibilities for principals, such as: a larger focus on teaching and learning, professional development, technology implementation, data-driven decision making, teacher evaluation systems, creating a collaborative culture, and establishing building goals. Covey (1992), Lambert (1998), and Speck (1999) found the overarching goal of a principal in the 21st century involved empowering teachers and building a collaborative culture. This created effective learning opportunities for students and teachers based on shared values and beliefs. Principal research focused on helping principals become change agents (Fullan, 1982; Hargreaves & Fullan 1998) and encouraged principals to act as leaders in all aspects of the school, including areas of instruction (Senge et al., 2000).

The Wallace Foundation (2011) studied practices associated with effective principal roles, and identified five key job responsibilities of contemporary principal leaders, including: (a) shaping a vision of academic success for all students, based on high standards; (b) creating a safe climate that allows and promotes growth; (c) cultivating leadership in others so teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision; (d) improving instruction to enable teachers to instruct at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and (e) managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. All five of these leadership functions working together create the platform for an effective principal (Wallace Foundation, 2011). In addition, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2013) stated the most important aspect of school leadership to be “the little things-abstract, but very tangible” (p. 3). For example, a

survey of 40,000 teachers conducted by Scholastic and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) asked teachers about the factors that affect retention. This study found “supportive leadership is the standout, top-ranked item” (p. 39).

Waters et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis focused on the relationship between school leadership behaviors and student achievement. They found principal leadership and behavior correlate with measures of student achievement. Effective principals “notice the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and use this information to address current and potential problems” (p. 4). Effective leadership means more than knowing what to do—it is knowing when, how, and why to do it.

A report from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) examined the importance of the vision set by the principal. Effective school leaders know how to focus on the essential goals of the school, provide a clear mission or purpose for the school, and identify goals aligned with the mission. Principals communicate the purpose and goals in a meaningful way so all stakeholders understand what they need to do (McIver, Kearns, Lyons, & Sussman, 2009).

Finally, a study of principals in high-need districts characterized most principals as falling into one of two categories—“transformers” or “copers” (Johnson, Rochkind, & Doble, 2008). The “transformer” group possessed an explicit vision of what their school might be like and brought a “can-do” attitude to their job. Transforming principals focused intently on creating a culture in which each and every student can learn. In contrast, the “copers” tended to get stressed out from the demands of the job and struggled to avoid being overwhelmed.

Principals as Leaders

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) argued an empirical link exists between school leadership and improved student achievement. Drawing on case studies and quantitative analysis, their research showed “most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass” (p. 14). I identify the definition and impact of principal leadership in this section of my review.

Louis et al. (2010) claimed “[principal] leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (p. 9). The leadership effects on student learning occur largely because leadership strengthens professional communities, and teachers’ engagement in professional communities, in turn, fosters the use of instructional practices associated with student achievement.

Determining the impact of principal leadership may prove difficult, however, quantitative data from Louis et al. (2010) found the total (direct and indirect) effect of principal leadership on student learning accounted for approximately a quarter of total school influence. Multiple research teams have independently examined evidence-based practices for principals that lead to school and student achievement. While each research team drew different conclusions, some common practices across studies indicate the following principal actions to be associated with student achievement, high-performing schools, and overall school success: (a) Creating and sustaining an ambitious, commonly accepted vision and mission for organizational performance; (b) Engaging deeply with teachers and data on issues of student performance and instructional

quality; (c) Efficiently managing resources, such as human capital, time, and funding; (d) Creating physically, emotionally, and cognitively safe learning environments for students and staff; (e) Developing strong and respectful relationships with parents, communities, and businesses to mutually support children's education; (f) Acting in a professional and ethical manner (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). Although not commonly included in research reviews, Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2006) claimed "touchstones" for principal impact on school achievement include consistently focusing on learning, teaching, curriculum, evaluation and ensuring others in the organization do so as well.

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) examined the effect of leadership on student achievement to determine exactly what characteristics effective principals possess. The results suggested a significant positive correlation exists between effective school leadership and student achievement. The findings revealed effective leaders affect student achievement in 21 key areas:

(1) culture; (2) order; (3) discipline; (4) resources; (5) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (6) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (7) focus; (8) visibility; (9) contingent rewards; (10) communication; (11) outreach; (12) input; (13) affirmation; (14) relationship; (15) change agent role; (16) optimizer role; (17) ideals and beliefs; (18) monitoring and evaluation; (19) flexibility; (20) situational awareness; and (21) intellectual stimulation. (p. 49)

In addition, Waters et al. (2004) concluded effective leaders possess a thorough understanding of the changes with the greatest effect on student achievement, how to successfully implement these changes, and ways to modify their leadership practices to reach the desired goal. They stated, "leaders can act like effective leaders, but if they fail to guide their schools toward making the correct changes, these changes are likely to have a diminished or negative impact on student achievement" (p. 50). Emphasizing the importance of leadership, researchers argued leaders

interested in changing their school culture should first consider looking into the mirror to determine what adjustments need to be made in order to become a more effective leader.

Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundlach (2003) conducted principal interviews and used a musical metaphor to describe three different leadership approaches exhibited by principals. School leaders who did it all themselves equal “one-man bands”. Principals who delegated responsibilities to others operated like the leader of a “jazz combo” (p. 26). Principals who believed broadly in sharing leadership throughout the school served as “orchestral leaders” (p. 26) skilled in helping large teams produce a coherent sound, while encouraging soloists to shine. Many leadership styles exist among principals, assistant principals, formal and informal teacher leaders, and parents, but the principal remains the central source of leadership influence in a school.

Principal Preparation Programs

As the role of a 21st century principal continues to expand and evolve, questions arise as to whether there will be enough qualified candidates to positively affect teaching and learning for all students, staff, and community members (Archer, 2004; Mitgang, 2003; Kaplan, Owings, & Nunnery, 2005). The complexity and amount of duties expected of principals continue to grow (Archer, 2004; Mitgang, 2003; Kaplan et al., 2005). Increasingly, principals must focus on curriculum, data- driven decision making, professional development, specialized instruction, support programs, improving culture within a school, and ultimately high levels of learning for all students (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Copland (2001) argued excessive principal expectations exist for those taking on this role:

Now, two decades into the current age of school reform, one can argue that we have reached the point where aggregate expectations for the principalship are so exorbitant that they exceed the limits of what might reasonably be expected from one person. (p. 529)

These high expectations make it essential for school districts to hire exceptional and qualified leaders (Winter, Rinehart, & Munoz, 2002). In this section of the literature review, I identify the historical background of principal preparation programs, the challenges arising during preparatory programs, and the essential elements of an effective principal preparation program.

Historically, early preparation programs prepared principals to manage the day-to-day operations of a school. The idea of instructional leadership, standards-based reform, and accountability for student learning became priorities later in time (Copland, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Lumsden, 1992). In a case study of multiple principal preparation programs, Peterson (2002) found, “the design of [preparation programs] to be complex and require careful attention to both structural and cultural features” (p. 229). Initial principal preparation programs spent a majority of time in the classroom focusing on philosophy and coursework with little real world clinical training opportunities (Copland, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Peterson, 2002).

A historical analysis by Donmoyer, Yennie-Donmoyer, and Galloway (2012) identified early tension in the objective and purpose of principal preparation programs. Levine (2005) stated two opposing viewpoints for preparation programs illustrated by James Earl Russell and Henry Homes. James Earl Russell, Dean of Columbia University’s Teachers College, favored “a practitioner-based program for experienced school administrators who attended part-time and studied a curriculum focusing on the practical subjects they needed to do their jobs” (p. 15). In contrast, Henry Homes, Dean of Harvard’s School of Education, called for a preparation model like those of law and medical schools. Homes advocated for a two-year master’s program with an academic curriculum to educate young aspiring principals without leadership experience. The structure of classes involved a one-year general academic core program, and a focus on teaching, administration, and other specialties in the second year.

Both deans continued their philosophies, eventually leading to differing goals and the creation of separate principal preparation programs (Levine, 2005). No consensus was reached regarding who should enroll in these programs, or what they should prepare their students to do. The deans lacked agreement on what should be taught, who should teach within the programs, what degrees should be offered, and/or how educational administration relates to teaching and research.

While increased accountability and standards-based reform have caused all areas of education to be scrutinized, differing views of how principal preparation programs should be constructed continue to challenge educational circles and university programs today. In an in-depth analysis study by Orr and Barber (2006), numerous inconsistencies across preparation programs included differing school improvement theories, the lack of clearly developed curriculum to support development of instructional leadership skills, and a framework used to guide high quality hands-on internships.

Davis et al. (2005) identified some of the challenges and pitfalls of short-term internships for aspiring principals. First, they found principal candidates received inadequate field-based internships while still working full-time as teachers. The candidates received few hands-on experiences because teaching duties occurred simultaneously to these internship experiences. Due to limited direct involvement in school leadership, candidates lacked opportunities to grapple with the real demands of school leadership under the supervision of a well-qualified mentor.

Davis et al. (2005) argued interns received ad hoc projects disconnected from the hands-on challenges and daily requirements of the principal's job. Many of these projects included facilitating a committee, developing a presentation, or some form of written work done outside

of the normal teacher duty day. They found these experiences to be useful, but lacking the true essence of the day-to-day responsibilities of a principal.

Additional concerns within preparation programs include coursework, identification of necessary skills needed to be a successful principal, inclusion of current school and district missions reflective of reform efforts, on the job training, and a lack of instructional technology integration (Coffin, 1997). Traditional preparation programs show principal candidates differ in their opportunities to learn, and depend on the location or district where the principal candidate works to gain experiences to adequately prepare them for the principalship (Coffin, 1997). The National Staff Development Council (2001) recommends the following skills be taught in preparation programs to prepare principals to deal with the changing role of the job: (a) learn strategies that can be used to foster continuous school improvement, (b) understand how to build supportive school cultures that promote and support adult and student learning, (c) develop knowledge about individual and organizational change processes, (d) develop knowledge of effective staff development strategies, (e) understand important sources of data about schools and students, and how to use data to guide instructional improvement efforts, and (f) learn public engagement strategies, including interpersonal relationship skills (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000, p. 4-6).

Davis et al. (2005) conducted a series of in-depth case studies of eight highly developed pre- and in-service program models in five states, and tracked the graduates into the schools they lead. Davis et al. (2005) found effective principal preparation programs have the following structures in place:

research-based content aligned with professional standards and focused on instruction, organizational development, and change management; (b) curricular coherence that links goals, learning activities, and assessments around a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge about effective organizational practice; (c) field-based internships that enable candidates to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner; (d) problem-based learning strategies, such as case methods, action research, and projects, that link theory and practice, and support reflection; (e) cohort structures that enable collaboration, teamwork, and mutual support; (f) mentoring or coaching that supports modeling, questioning, observations of practice, and feedback; (g) collaboration between universities and school districts to create coherence between training and practice as well as pipelines for recruitment, preparation, hiring, and induction. (p. 8-12)

Brazer and Bauer (2013) found principal preparation programs that include essential skills and structures to be deemed exceptional programs. In addition, Brazer and Bauer (2013), found high levels of student satisfaction with exceptional programs. Graduates reported increased confidence and competence related to carrying out the principal duties and responsibilities correlated with accelerating teaching and learning. These individuals also reported the skills acquired through their licensure programs “prepared them well for the complexities of organizational management in schools, and particularly for their roles as instructional leaders” (Davis et al., 2005, p. 41). Graduates of exemplary preparation programs appear to be significantly more prepared to obtain and sustain quality principal positions.

Principal Development

As the role of the principalship continually evolves, graduates from principal preparation programs and school leaders need professional development to grow and improve as leaders. Fullan (1991) defined professional development as “the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from the first day on the job to retirement” (p. 326). Duttweiler (1989) extended the definition of professional development to include any activity or process intended to “promote positive changes in knowledge, skills or attitudes that are congruent with established goals” (p. 2). Fullan (1991) described the ultimate purpose of

professional development involving changing the “individual and organizational habits and structures [to] make continuous learning a valued and endemic part of the culture within a school and amongst the staff” (p. 343). Sarason (1990) concluded it is “virtually impossible to create and sustain productive learning for students when the conditions do not exist for teachers and principals” (p. 45). This section of the literature review includes the studies on the purpose of principal professional development, types of professional development, and the effectiveness of professional development.

Many states require principals to receive a set amount of professional development hours to renew their licenses. For example, principals in Minnesota need to obtain 125 hours of professional development every five years to renew their principal license (Licensure Information, 2008). Many professional development activities only require seat time in a class, conference, or workshop. Mestry and Grobler (2004) analyzed principal professional development programs and found professional development to be effective when principals established goals after participating in an activity. Mestry and Grobler (2004) also argued there should be ongoing coaching, discussion, and individual acquisition of techniques and skills learned to conceptualize the information. However, many states require little to no further evidence of the professional development activities having an impact on practice.

Schwartz and Bryan (1998) analyzed professional development programs and found three distinct ways principals learn: formal, non-formal, and informal education. Formal professional development takes place in a classroom with books, an instructor, and a certain amount of seat time (Schwartz, & Bryan, 1998). Non-formal professional development takes place through organized activities held outside of the traditional classroom to provide learning such as, “speakers, training programs, orientation programs, and professional associations” (Schwartz &

Bryan, 1998, p. 7). Other non-formal professional development activities include action research, online resources, or collaborative planning (Guskey, 2003). Informal professional development happens with experience and reflection (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). Informal professional development includes observing, job shadowing, learning by doing, and mentorships (Guskey, 2003; Schwartz, & Bryan, 1998). Mentorships may also be viewed as formal approaches if they have structure and guidelines in the relationship between individuals participating in the mentorship.

According to Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2012), schools have started to move away from an era when professional development meant a speech or workshop. More recently, a variety of new formats for professional development have emerged: “beginning principal mentor programs,” where first year principals receive a mentor with more experience to work and reflect on the challenges of the job; “skill development programs,” to identify areas for growth and engage in critical reflection for improvement; “professional learning communities,” where principals from the same or different districts, discuss common problems, implement innovative ideas together, and provide mutual support; and “university partnerships,” both partners considered equal, have mutual rights and responsibilities, make contributions, and receive benefits (p. 236-237).

Evans and Mohr (1999) implemented a yearlong principal professional development program and found seven core beliefs surrounding principal learning:

Principals’ learning is personal and yet takes place most effectively while working in groups; (2) Principals foster more powerful staff and student learning by focusing on their own learning; (3) While we honor principals’ thinking and voices, we want to push principals to move beyond their assumptions; (4) Focused reflection takes time away from “doing the work”; yet, it is essential; (5) It takes strong leadership in order to have truly democratic learning; (6) Rigorous planning is necessary for flexible and responsive implementation; and (7) New learning depends on protected dissonance. (p. 530 – 532)

Effective professional development programs include long-term, carefully designed job-related experience and a focus on student achievement (Peterson, 2002). Peterson (2002) found professional development programs should include reflective practice and provide opportunities to work, discuss, and solve problems with peers, coaching, and mentoring. Overlap exists in the various professional development activities. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2007) contended the most successful professional development programs combine multiple formats.

Hoffmann and Johnston (2005) interviewed principals to gain a perspective on what type of professional development allowed principals to do their jobs most effectively. According to their research, principals requested opportunities to network with peers. Hoffmann and Johnston (2005) claimed “one of the most profound effects of principal partnership is the way innovation spreads across participating schools through principals’ networks” (p. 19). When principals build relationships with other principals, their competence and confidence grows.

Rodriguez-Campos, Rincones-Gomez, & Shen (2005) used data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to report the percentages of principals who participated in various types of professional development activities. The study found 97% of principals attended a workshop or conference in the previous 12 months, while 38% of principals participated in mentoring, peer observation, or coaching (p. 309). Rodriguez-Campos et al. (2005) indicated a positive trend in participation in professional development but concluded a need for “more innovative professional activities” because of the evolution of the position and increased responsibilities for principals (p. 318).

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)* provides funds to States and districts to improve the quality of their teachers and administrators to raise student achievement. According to the Department of Education (2015), “[these] funds are provided

through *ESEA* Title II, Part A. In the 2013-14 school year, Title II, Part A provided States with approximately \$2.21 billion for teacher and administrator improvement reforms” (p. 1). In order to better understand how school districts used the funds available to them in the 2013-14 school year, a nationally representative sample of 800 school districts filled out surveys. The results found districts used the majority, 44 %, of Title II, Part A funds for professional development activities for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, while 35 % went to hiring highly qualified teachers to reduce class sizes (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1). Of the funds used for professional development activities, districts reported 40 % of the funds were used for professional development of teachers and paraprofessionals and 4 % for administrators (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The results indicated smaller dollar amounts allocated to staff development for principals compared to teachers and provided no evidence that any of the professional development was effective for either group.

Principal Challenges and Frustrations

According to Goldring and Taie (2014), out of the 114,330 K-12 school principals (public and private) employed during the 2011–12 school year, 78 % remained at the same school during the following school year, 6 % moved to a different school, and 12 % left the principalship. In addition, 4 % of principals left their districts, but the current occupational status of the principal remained unknown (p. 2). Next, I describe the challenges and frustrations experienced by principals, and the effects of these frustrations on principal retention. These conditions may affect the 22% of principals who move districts or leave their jobs altogether each year (Goldring & Tate, 2014).

Sogunro (2012) interviewed 52 principals and found “96% of principals experienced work related stress that affected their mental and physical health, work habits, and productivity”

(p. 664). Sogunro’s (2012) identified seven major stress factors:

(1) unpleasant relationships, people, and conflicts, (2) time constraints, (3) school crisis, (4) policy demands and overwhelming mandates, (5) budgetary constraints, (6) fear of failure, and (7) negative publicity with the media. (p. 665)

In addition, Lyons (1993) conducted interviews with new K-12 public school principals. The findings indicated principals experienced challenges with delegating responsibilities, becoming familiar with the roles of a principal, and understanding school operations. Lyons (1999) later reported K- 12 principals’ greatest challenges and frustrations to be “managing time demands and paperwork” and “dealing with the bureaucracy, insensitive bureaucrats, red tape, politics, legislative demands and regulations” (p. 21).

In another study, Whitaker (1995) surveyed and interviewed 46 school principals. The principals represented K-12 school settings and the study found emotional exhaustion, depersonalization in the position, and the complexities within their roles as both challenges and frustrations in their jobs. In their qualitative content analysis of principal evaluation systems, Catano and Stronge (2006) concurred with Whitaker and found that multiple leadership and management theories proved to be difficult to understand. They stated, “school principals will likely experience role conflict and role expectation [confusion] as they work to fulfill the perceptions of what they are expected to accomplish, and how” (p. 224).

Buchen’s (2002) aimed to identify key challenges principals face during their job. In line with this purpose, Buchen employed a qualitative research methodology, interviewing principals and performing document analysis to collect detailed information concerning leadership and administration practice. Buchen (2002) argued the major issues causing school leaders to leave

the principalship were increased demands, lack of role clarity, lack of recognition, and decreased autonomy. Principals faced increased demands including accountability pressures, increased paperwork, time-management issues, and tensions related to restructuring and reform. Principals who lacked role clarity become frustrated with the growing number of roles and responsibilities in their positions. Principals who lacked recognition from all stakeholders perceived a need for more intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and recognition. Finally, principals faced decreased autonomy and often felt powerless and vulnerable.

Fullan (2001) analyzed theoretical and empirical knowledge about change processes and principal leadership. Fullan (2001) found four ways school leadership challenges principals: First, complex changes in the educational system; second, a number of moral and operational dilemmas in which a principal must decide what to do; third, a principal must respond or act differently depending on the context of the situation; and fourth, advice comes in the form of guidelines for action, not steps to be followed.

Leadership Growth Through Lived and Crucible Experiences

Dewey (1997) theorized all genuine education to be in some way connected to experience; however, not all experiences equally affect development. Some experiences can be counterproductive to growth (Cell, 1984; Dewey, 1997; Vaill, 1996). Studies dealing with human development and learning emphasize the importance of experiential learning (Bennis, 2003; Brungardt, 1997; Dewey, 1997; DiPaolo, 2002; Janson, 2008; Restine, 1997). Bennis and Nanus (2007) argued the most successful leaders learn from their experiences to become better leaders. Limited studies on life experience as a leadership development tool have been conducted in the field of education and principal leadership. However, the concepts identified in

the following studies can transcend into the world of education. This section of the literature review will focus on leadership growth through lived and crucible experiences.

Avolio (1994), one of the first and major contributors to the field of experiential learning, conducted a qualitative study attempting to identify a correlation between life experiences and transformational leadership qualities among community leaders from both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. The analysis of this study resulted in seven life experience themes affecting leadership: life satisfaction, parental interest, moral standards of parents, parental description, high school extracurricular participation, school experience, and positive work experience.

Janson (2008) in a qualitative study collected 198 leadership stories from 66 people enrolled in a leadership development program. The participants identified and shared three formative leadership experiences with the other participants and researchers. Of the 198 stories collected, only five of the stories related to professional development or formal learning experiences. Life experiences exerted greater impact on the development of leaders than formal training or education. In addition, out of all the experiences incurred in life, some experiences stood out as being formative for leadership development depending on how the participant remembered, processed, and applied the lessons learned (Janson, 2008).

Shamir et al. (2005) found early socialization experiences proved to be essential to the development of leaders. In their study, Shamir et al. (2005) used a biographical life story approach to obtain their research. Through in-depth interviews, four leadership development themes became apparent: natural process, learning process, finding a cause, and coping with difficulties. Leadership as a natural process became apparent because all the leaders told stories of being special. This innate characteristic became a part of the person and it followed them

throughout their lives. Leadership development as a learning process referred to learning from experience. Individuals' abilities to reflect and analyze their experiences helped them become great leaders. Lastly, leadership development occurred from coping with difficult situations, including leaders coming from a place of disadvantage and having to overcome a struggle. These examples identify the importance of learning through experience and reflecting on experiences to achieve more effective leadership.

Leaders often become recognized and praised for their successes; however, they must deal with failures too. The ability to deal with adversity – crucibles – often lead to the development of skills necessary to be successful in high-stress situations (Bennis, 2003; Dolitch, 2005; Janson, 2008; Khaleelee & Woolf, 1996; Vaill, 1996). Life experiences, known as crucibles (Thomas, 2008), catalyze the process of learning from experience and may exert a significant impact on leadership development.

Thomas (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 150 experienced leaders to learn about effective leaders. He interviewed participants, and also analyzed biographies and autobiographies of 63 business experts. Thomas found three common qualities in regards to outstanding leadership: First, a leader's adaptive capacity, "the ability to learn about yourself, about the world around you, about what it takes to adjust and make change" (p. 8); second, a leader's ability to "engage others through shared meaning and one who is capable of mobilizing the best in people through shared vision" (p. 8); and third, "integrity, knowing what you stand for and possessing a strong moral compass" (p. 8). Thomas (2008) claimed these three qualities cannot be developed in the classroom, but must be developed through lived experience.

In addition, another finding from Thomas (2008) identified resiliency as the key trait to

getting through a crucible productively. He recognized this trait as a process and identified three key moments that enable a person to progress through their crucible: First, “recognizing the tension that accompanies a crucible” (p. 47); second, “reframing the tension as something knowable and manageable” (p. 47); and third, “resolving the tension constructively” (p. 47). Thomas claimed, for leaders, identifying the tension inside a crucible can be difficult; “it requires a person to distinguish between the force driving for change and the force trying desperately to sustain the status quo” (p. 47). It requires an awareness of one’s vulnerability (difficult things happened to *me*), and yet it demands a relentless sense of agency (I *can* do something despite these circumstances). When reshaping and reframing the tension a person usually has his/her beliefs, values, and assumptions called into question (Thomas, 2008).

An individual’s upbringing (Lakoff, 2002) and the social soil (Fesmire, 2003) in which he/she grew up may dramatically affect how an individual responds to difficult experiences. This may cause a person to either become defensive or engage in critical reflection (Fesmire, 2003). According to Thomas (2008), “the main goal in critical reflection [is] to find an angle or a lens through which the current reality can be reshaped into a healthier and more productive outcome” (p. 51). When resolving the tension constructively, people can experience a worldview shift (Muller, 1993; Rigoni, 2002) or paradigm shift (Callinicos, 2011), which challenges leaders to examine their current habits (Fesmire, 2003) and make sense of how they will move forward.

An individual’s reaction to the events, and the way he or she makes meaning of the experience, inevitably leads to how much learning takes place because “every experience affects, for better or worse, the attitudes which help decide the quality of future experiences” (Dewey, 1997, p. 37). Leaders may identify a struggle or stressful situation that has occurred throughout

their lives (Bennis, 2003; Dolitch, 2005; Janson, 2008; Khaleelee & Woolf, 1996; Shamir et al., 2005). However, it is not the event itself that helps to develop the leader; the meaning of the crucible situation and the learning derived from experience lead to knowledge and wisdom about leadership.

Tensions in the Literature

Several tensions exist in the literature on principal leadership; however, two become particularly relevant to examining the continued professional development needs for effective school leaders. First, disagreement exists as to how much time principals should spend on each of their job responsibilities. Second, no conclusions have been made as to the most effective form of professional development for principals to increase their capacity to lead. Next, I define each tension and discuss their ramifications.

Principals are considered the instructional leaders of the school; however, many principals struggle to find time for instructional- related tasks. A study by Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2009) examined the relationship between the time principals spent on different types of activities and school success. On average, principals spend almost 30 % of their day taking care of administrative responsibilities, such as supervising students, fulfilling compliance requirements, and managing schedules. Principals spend 20 % of their day on organizational management activities, such as hiring, managing staff, and budgets. In contrast, principals, on average, spend a mere 10 % of their day on instruction-related tasks – roughly equally split between tasks related to day-to-day instruction, such as conducting classroom observations, and those related to the broader instructional program, such as implementing professional development for teachers (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009). Given the research and national emphasis of principals as instructional leaders, one would expect more time to be devoted to

instruction. The continued push to accelerate instruction and student achievement needs to be countered with a shift in time allocation for principals. However, principals struggle to find time to get all of the managerial duties done in a shorter time span so they can engage in more meaningful instructional leadership practices.

The principal may serve as the most important person in a school building and the loneliest (Prothero, 2015). The isolation and responsibility causes stress, leading to rapid turnover rates, especially in high-poverty schools. School leadership experts claim robust and ongoing training can alleviate some of those issues and help keep principals on the job, but professional development for school leaders often gets overlooked for other pressing needs such as teacher training (Prothero, 2015). Of the “\$1 billion the federal government sends to districts annually for professional development, 91 % goes to teachers, leaving 9 % for principals” (p. 10). But even if programs for principal professional development were better financed and became more accessible, the quality and relevance of professional development remains a huge challenge. Needs vary from rookie to veteran principals and ways to assess the effectiveness of professional development remain limited. According to leaders in education some of the tenants of good professional development should be individualized, rooted in real-school problems and spread-out over time (Prothero, 2015). Members of educational communities debate over the specific types of professional development and the delivery methods offered to support principal development.

The opposing forces of the “time allocation” and the “professional development” tensions keep school districts guessing about how to develop exceptional school principals in an evolving society. To accelerate teaching and learning for all students and staff members schools must identify how principals should spend their time and the methods used to ensure effective

professional development. These two literature tensions need more investigation to support student achievement and greater preparation of principals leading schools.

Gaps in the Literature

While several gaps exist in the literature, two became particularly relevant to examining the continued challenges facing principals: First, the lack of focus on the crucible experiences principals encounter, and second, on how principals grow in their role as effective leaders. I found literature describing the types and processes of staff development for educators. However, few studies attempted to define the type of experiences needed to help principals develop and grow – becoming stronger leaders and more effective principals. Likely if veteran principals shared their experiences with novice principals their confidence and competence in their role would improve. Failure and learning play important roles in developing effective leaders.

Richard Branson, chairman of Virgin Airlines claimed “The best developer of a leader is failure” (as cited in Dolitch, 2005). Business history discusses examples of leaders who learned from their failures and bounced back to become more successful than before. For example, Apple fired Steve Jobs, but he returned to his entrepreneurial roots and re-emerged at Pixar, where he created new products with new technology (Dolitch, 2005). When Jobs returned to Apple, he viewed the market differently and developed products like the iPod, iPad, and the iPhone, redefining the industry (Dolitch, 2005). This example and likely others show how insight from experience may allow leaders to gain a new perspective, increasing their sense of purpose and passion.

My study addresses a gap in the literature, namely the lack of professional knowledge about the experiences of learning from failure. Because of the orientation and imperative for action found in most schools today, few opportunities exist for leaders to step back, reflect, and

understand their inner motivations and strengths (Dolitch, 2005). People simply do not have an opportunity to think deeply about what happened during a particular incident and how it affected their leadership capacity. Principals become isolated to their own leadership journey and never get to hear about the experiences of longstanding successful principals. Making sense of significant crucible experiences during a person's career requires time and space for reflection.

Principals held accountable for the achievement and growth taking place in their school may adopt a "sink-or-swim, stumble through it" approach to leadership. Principals may benefit from the findings of empirical studies that may inform their practice. The two literature gaps, lack of principal crucible leadership experiences and lack of research on how principals become more effective, provided support for my study. I hope the findings from my study provide new insights regarding how professional preparation programs and professional development may support continued learning and growth. My assumption: Principals need more professional resources focused on learning from failure or difficult situations to improve their success in the challenging role.

Analytical Theory

The three theories most prevalent in the literature I reviewed on principal/adult learning included: Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2000), and Knowles' andragogical model of learning (1984). In this section, I show how these theories helped to interpret my literature review findings, and serve as a theoretical framework for my study.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) served as the starting ground for my research study because Kolb's theory assumes principals can learn through experience. Kolb developed a four-stage cyclical model to describe how adults learn and develop from experience.

Experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it” (p. 41). According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning theory was derived from Piaget’s (1975, 1985) theory of cognitive development, Lewin’s (1947, 1997) social research methods, and Dewey’s (1910, 2008) theory of experience. Kolb’s experiential learning theory has been influential in educational and business sectors around the world.

According to Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984), learning and development happen when people and/or the environment experience a change. The experiential learning process includes four stages: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation that form a continuous cycle of development and learning (Kolb, 1984). This learning cycle continues throughout a person’s life as they encounter new and challenging experience.

Kolb’s (1984) developmental process begins when a learner experiences conflict or tension requiring a decision. Once in a stressful or conflicted state, the learner reflects and observes on the experience, thinks about possible ways to respond, and uses active experimentation to resolve the conflict (Kolb, 1984). As the learner enters the fourth and last stage, his or her actions form new concrete experiences (frame of references). This process continues indefinitely until no concrete experience or action occurs to reignite the experiential learning process. To successfully learn from the experience, the learner must have the cognitive capabilities to perform at each of the four stages. Kolb claimed this four-stage cycle repeats itself continuously throughout a person’s life and can involve active and passive learning; concrete and abstract experiences. Kolb explained the process: “We continuously test our concepts in experience and modify them as a result of our observation of the experience. In a

very important sense, all learning becomes relearning and all education becomes reeducation” (1984, p. 59).

Critics of Kolb’s theory claim there is a lack of focus on a learner’s social context (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), and not enough research exists on the learner’s affective experiences throughout the learning process. These two limitations of Kolb’s theory resulted in only a partial understanding of the learning process and were not theoretically sufficient to fully inform my study. As principals become more seasoned, they experience more leadership challenges and learning opportunities. Moving through the four stages of Kolb’s learning cycle may provide principals with a better understanding of how to learn from experience.

Although Kolb’s theory established elements and actions in the learning and development process, the lack of description on the affective dimensions of the learning experience caused me to adopt Mezirow’s transformational learning theory (2000). While not all experiences exert a profound effect on leaders, some may be transformational, and alter the leader’s philosophy or course of action for the future.

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow (2000) describes transformational learning theory as the process adult learners go through as they achieve a transformation of their cognitive frames of reference. Mezirow defined transformative learning as a “process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (p. 5). During the transformation process the learner moves toward a “more developmentally progressive meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 192) and a “fuller realization of agency” (p. 25).

When the learning process causes a shift in perspective, it becomes transformative (Mezirow, 1981); “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). After going through a transformational learning process, frames of reference shift away from “unexamined way[s] of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way and hence a more dependable way of interpreting meaning” (Mezirow, 1999, p. 5).

Frames of reference change during the transformative learning process, causing the creation of new frames of reference entirely different from a previous or beginning frame of reference (Mezirow, 2000). When individuals’ learning experiences only slightly modify his/her frame of reference, the process cannot be considered transformative (Brookfield, 2000; Daloz, 2000; Kegan, 2000; Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow (2000), not all learning will be transformative. He described four types of learning that may occur, only three of which are transformative: (a) “elaboration of existing frames of reference” (nontransformative), (b) “learning new frames of reference” (transformative), (c) “transforming points of view” (transformative), and (d) “transforming habits of mind” (transformative) (p. 19). These four types of learning vary by the amount of knowledge gained and the transformational change affecting the learner. When learners go through a transformational experience, they acquire a new or transformed frame of reference, mindset, or point of view (Mezirow, 2000). When learners only slightly revise or modify their frame of reference, it is considered a nontransformative experience.

Mezirow’s transformational learning theory (2000) claims frames of reference transform through a ten-step process:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, guilt, or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

The transformational learning process may not be linear and can involve multiple movements back and forth between phases in a developmental progression "toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). In Mezirow's theory, learning and development begin with an internal or external dilemma that disorients the person's existing frame of reference or perspective. Next, the person enters a phase of self-analysis and examination in which previously held assumptions become critically assessed. Later a person uses rational discourse and critical reflection to transform his/her frame of reference to a new one (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Merriam, 2008; Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1991, 1994, 2000, 2003; Snyder, 2008).

Even though the process has been presented in ten steps or phases of meaning (Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1991, 1994, 2000), transformative learning reflects a general three-phase process of a beginning, middle, and end phase. To start, the learner will be in a cognitive state of equilibrium. After experiencing the first step of the transformative learning process, a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1991, 1994, 2000), the learner moves into the middle or liminal phase of disequilibrium. In steps two through nine, the learner works through the disorientation and disequilibrium by using the processes of critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 1981, 1991, 2000). If successful, the learner moves to the final step of reintegration

of the new frame of reference (Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1991, 1994, 2000), which becomes the end phase.

Critics of Mezirow's transformational learning theory believe Mezirow failed to address social context (Cranton, 2006; Merriam, 2008; Taylor, 1997). Clark and Wilson (1991) stated, "Mezirow systematically seeks to remove the very element which brings meaning to experience: context." (p. 69). In addition, Mezirow's transformative learning theory receives more criticism because it is too rational and fails to address the learning aspect of affective experiences, or why some learners transform and others do not (Taylor, 2000). Lastly, some researchers believe Mezirow's focus on individuals out of the social context to be a fundamental problem in his work (Collard & Law, 1989).

Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2000) serves as another way to interpret meaning from experience. While it is important for leaders to grow and improve throughout their careers, it is also beneficial for aspiring and novice leaders to learn from experienced principals about the incidents they may face during their career. Knowles' andragogical model of learning (1984) could be a way for principals to learn from each other's experiences and increase their collective leadership capacity.

Knowles' Andragogical Model of Learning

Knowles' andragogical model of learning (1984) created a change in adult education and learning theory, from teacher-centered to learner-centered. The model recognized the value of the personal experiences of learners and the use of those experiences to facilitate learning (McGrath, 2009). Many leadership development programs have been influenced by the andragogical model of learning through their focus on personal experiences as the path to learning.

Knowles (1984) made five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners (andragogy) that differ from the assumptions about child learners (pedagogy). First, Knowles (1984) described the importance of adult learners being self-directed. As a person moves from adolescence to adulthood, their self-concept should move from being dependent on others to being self-sufficient. Second, Knowles' (1984) emphasized the importance of experience in relation to learning. Knowles (1984) noted one adult learning from another adult could be a strong source of education. Therefore, drawing on the experiences of others through the form of discussion, simulation, field experiences, and projects involving problem solving could be an effective method for adult development and learning (Knowles, 1984). Third, Knowles (1984) assumed adults want to learn when presented with an opportunity to be more effective and efficient. Readiness can occur following a traumatic change in one's life such as a death, or a loss of job, or from learning through others and planning for the future (Knowles, 1984). In addition, learners can reflect on current practices and assess what information they know and what information they need (Knowles, 1984). Knowles (1984) fourth assumption was adults seek new information to assist with a task or to solve a problem. Therefore, adult learners need to know why the learning has relevance and what impact it can have on their practice (Knowles, 1984). Lastly, Knowles' (1984) argued internal motivators, such as quality of life, self-confidence, and recognition, remain more important to adults than external motivators such as pay raises (Knowles, 1984).

From his assumptions, Knowles (1984) developed four principles that should be taken into consideration when educating adults. First, he suggested thinking of ways to involve learners in the planning of instruction (Knowles, 1984). A student's commitment will be stronger when he or she becomes a part of the decision-making process (Knowles, 1984).

Second, using experiences (including mistakes) to drive a lesson will increase comprehension and engagement (Knowles, 1984). This type of learning increases problem-solving skills and encourages the learner to think critically about his or her decision making process. Third, the information should be directly applicable to their life (Knowles, 1984). Direct application increases adult learners' engagement and implementation. Lastly, the content should be problem-centered and not content-oriented. Developing problem-solving skills allows effective adults to thrive.

Critics of Knowles' andragogy theory do not believe there is enough evidence to support the assumptions (Brookfield, 1995; Burge, 1988). Andragogy has been called a "theory, method, technique, or set of assumptions" (Davenport & Davenport, 1985, p. 152). In addition, other researchers (Hartree, 1984) have asserted andragogy failed to encompass an underlying epistemological base. Hartree (1984) also questioned whether adult learning was truly different from child learning. Knowles viewed his assumptions of andragogy as a "system of concepts" rather than a theory, and the influence of many educational theorists is evident in these assumptions (Knowles, 1984).

Knowles's design for professional development, driven by the learner, could be extremely useful to my study as I seek to understand what difficult leadership experiences principals face, and how principals are being prepared for their tough leadership positions. Together principals could support each other's development by discussing problems, crucibles, and improvements directly correlated to their career growth. After obtaining the rich stories of crucible experiences from principals, Knowles design for professional development could be used to educate aspiring and novice principals. Kolb's (1984) and Mezirow's (2000) theories describe a process used by adult learners to navigate lived experiences. Knowles theory

combines the idea of experiential learning and collaborative learning to empower leaders to increase their network and share their experiences.

Summary

This chapter contained a review of the relevant literature related to principals and leadership development. The literature presented the following themes: (1) historical and contemporary roles and responsibilities of high school principals, (2) principals as leaders, (3) principal preparation programs (4) principal development, (5) principal challenges and frustrations, and (6) leadership growth through lived and crucible experiences. In addition, I addressed the tensions and gaps within the literature. Lastly, I addressed analytical theories presented in the literature that I used to inform my research study. Through my review of literature it became apparent that little research had been conducted on how principals identify and navigate crucible experiences or how these crucible experiences help principals grow as leaders.

Most of the research on leadership covers broad fields and does not focus specifically on the principalship, but rather on tips for how to become a leader. My research study fills the gap and identifies what crucible leadership experiences principals' face and how these experiences have shaped and improved the person's ability to lead. A study with this focus attempts to answer the following questions: How do high school principals experience and make meaning from "crucible" leadership experiences? What crucible leadership experiences do principals face? What skills do principals need to navigate these experiences? How have these experiences made the principal a stronger leader? How can preparation programs better prepare aspiring principals to be successful? How can principals network with each other and share experiences to increase confidence and competence?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I adopted a qualitative phenomenological research method to analyze crucible leadership experiences of high school principals. In this chapter, I describe the rationale for using qualitative research and a phenomenological approach in this study. Next, I describe the procedures used in conducting this study; I describe the IRB permission process and guidelines; I list the methods used to recruit and select participants, to collect data, and to analyze data; I identify my experience and bias; and I explain the reliability and validity of the study, and possible ethical concerns.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an inquiry process exploring a social or human problem. “Researchers engaging in qualitative study focus on observing, describing, interpreting, and analyzing the way people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4). Analysis in qualitative research has been described as involving “a close engagement with one’s [data] and the illumination of meaning and significance through insightful and technically sophisticated work” (Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2003, p. 30). Throughout the data collection process I allowed themes or categories to emerge naturally from the data, without constraints of predetermined categories (Creswell, 2013). The overarching goal of qualitative research was to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

Creswell (2013) argued qualitative research should be used when a problem or issue needs to be explored to gain a detailed understanding of the issue. Creswell (2013) believed, “this detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in literature” (p. 48). This study takes a qualitative approach because I’m

interested in the stories of high school principals that have shaped and guided their leadership practice. Qualitative research is well suited for capturing the complex understandings and critical aspect of this phenomenon (Glesne, 2006).

Phenomenological Research

This study utilized a phenomenological research method. Phenomenology has a strong philosophical background starting with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and those who expanded on his views, such as Heidegger, Satre, and Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982). In addition, phenomenology is a popular research method in the field of education and educational leadership (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological studies “describe common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The phenomenological design “focuses on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The purpose of phenomenology is to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a grasp of the very nature of things)” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

There are three defining features that are common in all phenomenological research studies (Creswell, 2013). First, researchers must place an emphasis on a phenomenon with a group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Second, researchers must immerse themselves into the lives of those in the study through participant observations or in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2013). Third, researchers develop “a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). This description consists of the “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Two approaches to phenomenology are commonly highlighted: hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (1990) described hermeneutical phenomenology as “oriented towards lived experiences (phenomenology) and interpreting the ‘texts’ of life (hermeneutics)” (p. 4). First, the researcher identifies a phenomenon, “abiding concern” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31), which sparks his or her interest. In the data collection process, the researcher reflects on the essential themes that arise throughout the lived experience. The researcher “writes a description of the phenomenon, maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry and balancing the parts of the writing to the whole” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The data collection allows the researcher to make an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience. “Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology focused less on interpretation of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). In addition, “Moustakas includes one of Husserl’s concepts of epoche (or bracketing), in which the investigator sets aside their experience, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The process of acquiring data includes identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher interprets the data by condensing the information down to meaningful statements or quotes to identify themes. Next, the researcher “develops a textual description of the experiences of the persons, a structural description of their experiences, and a combination of the textual and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80).

I selected the transcendental phenomenological research approach within the qualitative tradition because the design and method match my goal for examining crucible experiences of high school principals. As Moustakas (1994) mentioned, “The method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions [in this study]” (p. 47). Through in-depth interviews this method allowed my participants to provide rich descriptions of their crucible experiences, and enabled me to identify common themes amongst the participants. The data gathered provides the field of education with detailed descriptions of the phenomenon from the eyes of experienced principals. Since I have experience as a teacher and administrator in public schools, it was imperative I did not allow my personal assumptions, biases, and values to impact the data collected or interpreted in any way. I remained as objective as possible throughout the study, which is highlighted by the safeguards discussed in the next section.

University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board Permission and Guidelines

The purpose of seeking Internal Review Board (IRB) approval is to protect the confidentiality of the participants and to maintain the integrity of the research project. The participants in this study are human subjects, particularly high school principals working in the metro area of Minnesota. This study does not include a vulnerable population because of the age, economic status, and educational attainment of the participants. However, to protect the wellbeing of the participants, certain safeguards must be in place (i.e. signed informed consent, confidentiality agreements, data collection practices, etc.). As a researcher, I abided by the ethical code of conduct throughout my investigative practice.

I obtained the approval of the Institute Review Board (IRB) at the University of St Thomas for this phenomenological study by submitting the appropriate forms to the IRB network. I followed all IRB policies with regards to conducting human subject research and ensuring the protection of the participants within the study. Following the official approval from the IRB (Appendix A), I began formal recruitment and selection of participants for the study.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

After gaining IRB approval, I used the Internet to look up high schools within a thirty-mile radius of downtown Minneapolis. I used school websites and LinkedIn to identify principals with five or more years of lead high school principal experience. If the person had five or more years of lead high school experience, I identified him/her as a potential participant. If they did not have five years of lead high school principal experience or I was unable to find the necessary background information, they went into my do not contact list. I identified 58 principals that lived within 30 miles of downtown Minneapolis who met my qualifications. I reached out to people in my professional network who might know some of these experienced principals to see if I could leverage their relationship to entice the people to join my study. From those conversations, I targeted 45 principals to participate in my study by sending them an email (Appendix B) with two attachments: Invitation to Participate (Appendix C) and Informed Consent (Appendix D) which once signed by the principal, signified formal participation. My hope was to receive between 10 and 15 participations; I was able to obtain 17. For a description of the participant's background information please see Appendix E.

Next, I emailed the participants to find out dates and times that we could arrange a 60-90 minute interview at the principal's school during non-student contact hours in order not to disrupt his/her daily school life. I contacted all participants by phone or email 48 hours in

advance of our interview to confirm time, place, and purpose of the study. To begin our interview, I reviewed the confidentiality agreement written in the Letter of Consent (Appendix D) to secure participants anonymity and concealment of confidential information. I asked participants for their consent to be interviewed and recorded. I answered clarifying questions and provided purpose for why I was researching the topic before we began the data collection process.

Data Collection

The principals selected for this study had five or more years' experience as lead high school principal. I conducted the interviews in a one-on-one, face-to-face setting. All interviews lasted 55-90 minutes and I recorded them using a voice recorder. I started all interviews by describing the objective of the interview and significance of the study. I provided an interview outline (Appendix F) for the participant and an interviewer outline for myself (Appendix G) to ensure the structure of the study remained consistent throughout the data collection process. Participants referenced their outline when telling their stories to make sure they addressed all of the questions. The first part of the interview was a warm-up, where I got to know the principals' background and tried to make them feel comfortable sharing information with me. Next, I asked the participants to describe stories that related to the three research questions presented on the outline. I asked the participants to describe their crucible experiences and the effects on their leadership by setting the context for what it was like before the experience, what sparked the incident, and how they navigated the experience. Last, I asked the participants how the experience affected their perceptions and changed their leadership, particularly concerning their interactions and work with members of the school and community. I used storytelling as an inquiry method to capture the participants' unique narratives.

Throughout the interviews, I asked follow-up questions if more information was needed to garner deeper meaning and rich data from the participant responses. I took detailed field notes for each response during the interview on a personal notebook. Following the interview, I uploaded the audio recording to Rev.com to be transcribed. A confidentiality agreement (Appendix H) between Rev.com was established prior to transcriptions being completed. Once the transcript was sent back to me, I redacted any names and deleted any information the principal requested I remove from the transcript. I sent a copy of the transcript to the participants and gave them until Sept. 1, 2016 to read the transcript and omit any statements with which they did not feel comfortable. If a principal responded with changes, I deleted those sections or statements from the transcript before I began the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interview, I sent the voice-recorded interview to Rev.com for transcription. I saved the voice-recorded interviews to a separate removable hard drive and deleted the file from the recorder. I kept the removable hard drive locked in a cabinet when not in use. All participants reviewed their transcribed interview and were allowed to omit any information they did not want included in the study.

After each interview, I analyzed the data following analysis techniques recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) and Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008). First, I reviewed the field notes from the interview adding my observer comments speculating on and recording any commonalities or themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). After writing comments on the transcriptions, I circled key words or phrases used by participants while describing their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Maynes et al. (2008) stressed the importance of recognizing “what people do and their understandings of why they do what they do are typically at the center of their stories about their lives” (p. 3). Personal narratives provide access to an individual’s “motivations, emotions, imaginations-in other words, about the subjective dimensions of social action-have shaped by cumulative life experiences” (p. 3). Because participant life stories and worldviews differ, the interpretation of their stories require an awareness of the influences on story, and the analytical tools available to researchers to interpret stories for use in education research.

Knowledge of theories related to personal narratives put researchers using narrative inquiry on guard. Researchers must know how the story serves the teller’s purpose, and ways to ensure greater reliability in scientific research (Maynes et al., 2008). Maynes et al. (2008) provided ways to understand storytelling with five key concepts. Before the teller shares a story, several factors influence the way the storyteller analyzes experience and constructs the story.

“Personal narratives can reveal a social or historical dynamic that has been deliberately silenced or distorted by interested parties” (Maynes et al., 2008, p.9). The authors called these stories the “counter narrative” and stress the importance of bringing to light the untapped perspective and hidden histories of these stories. Throughout the interview process, I remained unbiased and provided counter narrative questioning to the participants to provide transparency and reflection. While analyzing the data, I searched for clear facts which allowed me to group the stories into the transformational phases without putting my own influence into the decision.

In addition, it was essential I understood that agency and subjectivity exist in the story telling process to clearly identify the amount of learning that took place during the crucible. Participants unable to fathom any alternative action when describing their story were not showing the realization of agency, a truly reflective approach (Maynes et al., 2008). As the

researcher, I had to assess the manner in which the participant told the story and decipher the facts from the subjective opinion of the participant. I used clear facts in the stories to negate any misunderstanding of a sense of agency.

Furthermore, when analyzing the data it was important to understand the participant's historical perspective and how that influenced the way the story was told. Additionally, my historical perspective and life experiences affected the way I interpreted the story and made meaning of the data (Maynes et al., 2008). Therefore, throughout the analysis section, I made concrete connections to the data and to my interpretations in order to ensure clarity and credibility.

Similarly, understanding the relationship dynamics of the study was important. The participants acted as the narrators, while I acted as the researcher. Most participants did not know me before participating in the study, so the tone and style of their stories may have been affected. In addition, as the researcher I may have acted differently than I would have with a trusted friend or family member. When analyzing the data, I kept the relationship out of mind and used data to guide my decision making process.

Lastly, I compared similar stories told by different participants to provide more reliable interpretation in the analysis section (Maynes et al., 2008). In the four categories I dissected in the analysis section, I found that similar thought processes and learning took place throughout the experiences. Themes emerged naturally based on the description and context of the stories given by the principals. After coding the themes, I reread the transcripts to be sure no common themes were left out. Then I developed the central themes, and used theory to interpret their meaning.

As principals described their crucible leadership experiences during the interview portion of this study, Kolb's cyclical experiential learning theory (1984) resonated in my mind as principals described experiences they had learned from. Likewise, Knowles' andragogical model of learning (1984) was useful in thinking about how the stories shared by participants could be used and taught in professional settings. However, when analyzing the data with Mezirow's (2000) ten-step transformational learning process many of the phases of learning were present in the stories told by participants. This led me to focus on Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2000) in the analysis section of the study. After analyzing the data it became clear that the participant stories fell into one of the four types of learning in Mezirow's theory, which include: elaborating on existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, or transforming habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). Upon further analysis it became clear that some of the stories were different because the participant had to resist their previously developed beliefs, values, and assumptions to emerge from their experience successful. Participants who articulated stories of this nature were not only going through a transformational learning experience, but also a transformational leadership experience.

Participant stories and reflections provided a useful tool to analyze their principal experiences and identify the key themes in learning from difficult situations. The interviews provided the space and time to reflect and recognize the key moments within their crucible experience. I collected rich information and coded the leadership skills and actions used by principals during difficult situations. I used theories concerning adult learning to analyze and interpret the data.

Researcher Experience and Bias

In a qualitative study, the researcher collects data. Because of this reliance on the researcher without benefit of others, the researcher must identify personal assumptions, biases, and values at the outset of the study to maintain validity and reliability. My lived experiences shaped my perception and beliefs of how leadership is represented and presented. I have served as a student, coach, teacher, dean of students, and now assistant principal and adjunct professor in educational settings, which enhanced my knowledge of the challenges and issues principals encounter. In addition, my experience working in the field of education provides me with insight into the daily responsibilities and leadership tasks required of a principal.

Although I cannot entirely relate to the experiences of lead principals, I do have assistant principal experience. As suggested by Moustakes (1994), I did my best to abstain from suppositions and focus on the topic “freshly and naively” (p. 47). I used “bracketing” techniques described by Creswell (1998) in which investigators “set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 58) to focus on the meaning of the principals’ lived experiences.

To bracket my experiences of working as a high school administrator, teacher, coach, and student, I asked my participants to add detail to the stories, so I possessed a complete understanding of the experience from their perspective. I wrote field notes to myself throughout the interview and transcription process to acknowledge and try to minimize my research bias. In addition, I reread the transcripts after the analysis of data to ensure I reported experiences focused on the facts shared during the interviews.

Validity and Reliability

In a qualitative study, validity and reliability provide merit to the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness of a study. In an effort to maintain the integrity of the study, I utilized the following strategies: (1) member checking- I maintained an ongoing dialogue with the participants throughout the study to ensure their voice was represented in an accurate description; (2) participatory modes of research- I involved these modes in every phase of the research process, from the design to the interpretation of the data and drawing conclusions; (3) clarification of researcher bias- in the “Experience and Bias” section, I discussed bias I might have had during this study and ways I tried to neutralize those factors (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the main source of validity comes from the deep, detailed stories the participants shared. As Creswell (2013) argued, when detailed description of the findings are presented, the results become more realistic and credible. In addition, I ensured validity by working with a committee of three St. Thomas faculty members experienced in qualitative research methods.

Ethical Considerations

Participants took risks in telling a complete stranger their stories. Revealing personal and professional challenges and philosophies placed the participants in an uncomfortable position. I made sure the participants felt comfortable during the interview by smiling and providing good body language. I showed sensitivity to the participants’ stories by listening openly without judgment. I did not impose my own beliefs on the story to allow leadership strategies and skills to emerge organically throughout the interview. Overall, I developed a solid rapport with the participants to alleviate any stress or discomfort they may experience due to their participation in the study.

In addition, to protect the volunteer participants and maintain confidentiality, no participant names are identified in the study. I used pseudonyms (names of my close friends and family members) for the participants and the people mentioned during their interviews. Before the interview, I notified participants of any potential harm associated with participating in the study. Participants signed a consent form granting permission to use their stories in the study after we reviewed the voluntary nature of the study, and their ability and the risk associated with their participation. After the transcription of the interviews, participants reviewed the document and omitted information they felt uncomfortable using in the study. I protected all transcripts in a locked cabinet for the duration of the study and destroyed them after my committee accepted my dissertation.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the methodology used in this phenomenological study. I identified the characteristics defining a qualitative and phenomenological study. I described the processes used to gain IRB approval, select and recruit participants, collect data, analyze data, identify researcher bias, and pinpoint strategies adopted to ensure reliability, validity, and ethical treatments of participants. The next two chapters include the stories told by the participants during the study. The first data chapter includes stories told that related to “new” principal problems, meaning they happened in the first three years of the participant’s tenure as a principal.

CHAPTER FOUR: “NEW” PRINCIPAL PROBLEMS

The first couple of years present many challenges for a new principal. In this chapter, I describe the stories of participants largely concerning their “entry” and first few years as “new” principals. These initial experiences challenged the principal’s leadership abilities and caused them to question whether they could serve successfully. The stories and the lessons learned affected principal views of successful and ethical leadership.

I organized the data described in this chapter into two sections. The first section of this chapter describes “new” principal problems in establishing his or her leadership and learning how to work with others. Participants described crucible experiences concerning (1) managing a difficult employee, (2) a conflict between the role of an individual as both a principal and a parent, (3) managing complaints about a racially-biased curriculum, and (4 and 5) learning how to develop trust and maintain effective relationships.

The second section concerns the relationship between the principal and superintendent, and also members of the school board. Participants described experiences involving (1) micromanagement, (2) unethical requests, (3) tainted interview processes, (4) lack of support leading to a student walkout, and (5) forced initiatives. I begin with an “entry” story concerning a principal and assistant principal. Two people applied for the position of principal, and only one was selected. These circumstances caused a conflict before Chris, the new principal, started his first day on the job.

Section One: Establishing Leadership

Working with a Difficult Employee

As soon as Chris was notified he was selected for the lead principal job at a Midwestern High School, the superintendent told him about a potential problem. He said there was

something he should be aware of as he moves into the role. The superintendent explained the problem:

One of the assistant principals in the building also applied for the position and was not selected. You need to navigate that relationship carefully as the assistant principal was a graduate from the high school, taught, coached, became a dean, then assistant principal and registrar at the high school. He is well liked by his colleagues and community. Everyone thought his next job was going to be the principal and then you came in and got the job over him. Again, you will need to navigate this relationship carefully.

Chris experienced the first major conflict over a decision regarding whom to hire for two available positions as a dean of students. As the administrative team began preparation for the beginning of the school year, Chris told the team he wanted to hire two women. All the current building administrators were men. The assistant principal challenged Chris in a private meeting. He wanted Chris to select someone else. Chris described how he handled the conflict:

At that point, I had enough experience that I didn't get in an argument about it. I stated these are the traits I'm looking for, this is why I think this is the best decision and not that the other candidate that you wanted wasn't strong, but here are the reasons why I picked [these candidates]. Then he was fine. Sometimes he liked to challenge just for the sake of challenging, and once I gave him an answer, he'd go, "All right, that makes sense to me."

Throughout the first year "things were tense" with the assistant principal, according to Chris:

He made things difficult on me. He asked "why" a lot the first year. I just had to be direct with him. I found that was the best way to work with him. I just told it like it was. I didn't beat around the bush.

Chris appreciated the questions in a private setting because it showed him the assistant principal cared and was invested in the school and students. Chris asked district personnel and staff a lot of questions to understand the reasons why the assistant principal was not selected for the lead principal position. The assistant principal never challenged or belittled Chris publicly, but at times he could tell it was hard for the assistant principal to manage his disappointment in not getting the position.

Chris learned a lot about working with people after handling conflicts with the assistant principal. Chris explained what he learned from the entire experience:

That experience was a little different because I had to come in and really listen, look and learn. I wanted to help the assistant principal accomplish his goals, but I didn't want to come off as insulting. In an already stressful year as a new principal to the building it added some additional stress.

The assistant principal later was appointed to the head principal role after Chris left for a larger district. Chris felt good about helping the assistant principal accomplish his goal, and managing the challenges to his leadership during the first year. The next story concerns a conflict over roles – how do principals manage a conflict between advocating for their child and also serving as a principal in the same school?

A Conflict Over Roles – How to Serve as Both a Parent and Principal

For the most part it was a great experience for David and his children to work and attend the same high school. However, there were two incidents that made it difficult for David to feel like he was being an effective parent and principal. David explained the first problem he faced with a teacher:

My daughter was in 9th grade and going through some anxiety. I tried working with a teacher as a parent, rather than as the principal. I tried to intervene and help my wife communicate our issues or concerns by email and face-to-face conversations. The teacher responded by getting their district Union representative to tell me I was forcing her to do things she didn't have to do.

David was shocked that the teacher didn't express discomfort to him before bringing the situation to the district office. David was asked to have a meeting with the superintendent and district union representative to explain his actions. David explained how he was feeling during the experience:

I was like, “Really?” I’m trying to be a parent, understand what’s going on and try to help my daughter. During the whole experience I felt like the door to helping my daughter with her anxiety was closed because of who I was. I felt like I could not take my principal hat off to be a parent.

In the end, David was asked by the superintendent to let his wife handle the situation. David realized his job could be in jeopardy if he didn’t back down, so he let his wife do everything on her own. David explained that letting his wife handle school issues on her own “ate him up.”

The second experience involved a coach and David’s daughter. David explained the situation:

The anxiety for my daughter brought on a kind of awkwardness and quietness during the first year or two of high school. Her basketball coach told her that she was socially inept, to her face, in front of the other kids. She then told her she wasn’t going to play her until she could figure out how to socialize with others. Then she followed through with her comments and stopped playing her.

Being the supervisor of athletics and having a kid involved in a situation like this was challenging for David. David explained his initial reaction:

It’s two fold because people can think that your kid is playing because of who you are, or at times they’re not playing and it might be because the coach doesn’t like you. The coach continued to make statements to my daughter that she’d better figure it out or she’s not going to be on the team next year.

David decided to call an attorney to find out his options. David decided his best move was to call a meeting with the AD and coach. In the meeting, David told the coach “You’re not going to call my daughter socially inept in front of people. I’m going to remind you of this one time.” This situation “blew up” and David was required to have a different district administrator handle the meetings with that coach moving forward. David had to remove himself and let the process take place without him. David’s daughter ended up quitting at the end of the year because of the way she was treated, and nothing was ever done with the coach. David explained how he felt about the situation:

That was frustrating. I couldn't fire the coach because then it's going to be a lawsuit. My daughter quitting had nothing to do with playing time. It was about the coach saying mean stuff to her players. I had to let it go and let the process happen without me. In support of the process, I hoped the right ending was going to come. In this case, it didn't.

David noted that 95% of having his kids in his school went great. He knew a lot of kids during those years and felt really connected, but these two experiences proved to be "awkward." David explained what he learned during this experience:

People can be harassed and bullied from the bottom up too. Staff will use your kids to manipulate situations. I also learned the importance of a strong principal network that I can call and bounce ideas off of when deciding how to handle a scenario.

David realized people can be passionate and hurt over something that somebody's doing to their own children and at times those incidences can put your job at risk if you are not careful. David recommended new principals attend the state conferences and functions to grow their professional network in case a similar situation like this occurs. The next story concerns a conflict over racial curriculum and how a first year principal sparked a change.

Racial Curriculum and Innovatively Sparking a Change

Nate was in his first year as lead principal of High Stakes High School and immediately had his leadership ability tested. Nate explained the makeup of the school:

The high school was in an affluent suburban district with approximately 40 percent students of color and 40 percent free and reduced lunch. Many students chose [High Stake High School] through The Choice is Yours Program, where students could leave the urban area because of overcrowding and get bussed to other schools in nearby districts. During this time, I was one of only two lead high school principals of color in the entire state and there had never been a person of color as the lead principal of High Stakes High School.

In the district, at the time, they had been using a book by Dick Gregory. The title of the book is N-I-G-G-E-R, so it's the N word. They had been doing this in an honors U.S. history class.

Nate explained how he was notified about the book:

I did not know this as the lead principal. One day, not a student of color, a Caucasian student approached me and said, "Do you know that we read this book?" They just said it to me and I was like, "Yeah right." In this day and age, nobody's reading that book in school. We talked out in the hallway and I actually asked my Administrative Assistant if she would track it down to see if this was real. I was in a meeting with some parents in the community and my Administrative Assistant interrupted the meeting, walked in and set the book down on my desk. I looked down at it and the title of it is just blatant, like you can't miss it. I actually almost covered it up as I was talking to the parents. My Administrative Assistant looked at me, shook her head and walked out.

After school, Nate took his first step in dealing with the crucible:

I went to the district level and asked, "Is this real?" He's like, "Yeah, it's a book we use." Then, I had a conversation with the teacher and asked, "Please explain the rationale of reading this book." He explained the who, what, where, why, when. Then, he said "It's cleared through the district."

Nate knew that if he stepped in to intervene, he would be going against district practice. He also would be a first year principal, going against a department. Plus he is the first principal of color at the school and he would be the person to put a stop to the book. He could have taken the book out of all the classrooms that day and his superintendent would have supported him, but he decided to take a different path. The next day a group of students of color came into Nate's office for a different meeting:

The students saw the book. They said, "Mr. Nate, I hate that book." I said, "Tell me why?" They said, "We talk about it in class. We read it out loud." I'm thinking to myself, "Jeez." I said, "Have you ever expressed that to your teacher?" A couple of them said, "Yeah, we've had that conversation, but he says it's a district sponsored book." I said, "Alright, thanks for letting me know."

Nate was starting to believe there was a contingency of people who were uncomfortable with this book. The next day, during a student meeting, Nate had a conversation:

A young Caucasian student walked into my office and looked down at my desk. She said, "Oh, I see you have the book. My question to you is what are you going to do about it?" I looked at her and I said, "Well, here's my concern." She said, "Mr. Nate, there's a large Jewish population at this school. If this book had any kind of Jewish name, or derogatory name to it, it would not be part of the curriculum." She just point blank said it. She said, "You need to do something about it."

Nate took the weekend to think about what he should do. He called mentors and principals he trusted and got their opinions. On Saturday, he held a family reunion at his house and someone saw the book. Nate described the debate that ensued amongst his family members:

My family saw this book in my house and said, "Explain this to us?" I went on to explain the scenario to them. They were in this huge debate. One of my Uncles looked at me and said, "I thought you were the principal? That ends that. You can tell them not to do this." My Grandmother in her wisdom said, "That's the thing, he is the principal."

That Monday, Nate walked to the teacher's classroom before school to have a conversation.

Nate asked the teacher if the students had ever given him feedback on the book. The teacher said "yes" and explained how he had cleared it with one of his African American students the previous year. Then he said, "You know what...our relationship was never the same after we read the book." Nate said, "Have you asked him why?" The teacher said, "I have not." Nate said, "Well, who is he, let's call him?" The student told the teacher how when that word was said in front of his classmates, it put a whole different spin on it for him. After the conversation, the teacher asked Nate if he was giving him a mandated order to stop reading the book in class. Nate said "No, not yet".

The next day, the teacher approached Nate with a solution:

The teacher walked into my office and said, "I solved it." He had all his students cover the book. I said, "Okay, so they covered it, now what?" He thought he had come to this great conclusion. Now, when the students brought the book to lunch it wouldn't be as noticeable. I remember looking at him saying, "So, you've covered it, but it stills goes on in your class, do you mind if I come to your next class period?"

Nate did not plan on having a conversation about the book with the students, but when he entered the classroom the students started asking him questions:

The students started firing questions at me. One young lady looked at me and said, “It’s about time, that I see someone that looks like you in one of my classrooms. I’m a senior in high school. I’m a Caucasian girl getting ready to go out into the world and I’ve never been exposed to an African American male with degrees, in a leadership role.” She said, “Besides the students in this classroom, who are of color, who I know are happy to have you as our principal.” She goes, “I’m just telling you that I am happy too.”

Nate was taken back by the fact that a white girl expressed her happiness to have an African American principal. He said, “I had never thought about it that way.” Nate started to ask the students questions such as, “What’s it like when they start talking about Africa in books you read?” Nate told his story to the students so they could relate to him:

Way back in the day, I went to school before dinosaurs. I was the only kid of color. Anytime, anything about race, culture, or Africa came up, I always felt that all eyes were on me and I experienced pain and suffering with that.

Many students both Caucasian and students of color agreed with Nate and said they felt “uncomfortable” stating the N word in class and reading the book in general. Nate asked the students if they had expressed their feelings to the teacher, who was sitting in the back of the classroom taking it all in. Many of the students said “no, because he’s in the leadership role, he’s our teacher.” Nate encouraged them to speak to their teacher as he was a “receptive and reflective man.” Nate told the students, “understand, I’m not going to give your teacher a directive but feel free to talk to him about it.” After that the teacher stopped teaching the book.

What stood out as a learning lesson for Nate was he could’ve come in as a first year principal and created a storm right away. That could have created disenchantment with the department and alienated the teacher, who had years of experience and a passion/love for students. Instead, by giving the teacher a choice to do the right thing, they were able to keep his pride intact. Nate described the other lessons he learned from this crucible:

Listen to students; work with staff and don't always necessarily give directives, receiving trust from somebody above me was important; the situation empowered me, I felt confident in my ability to handle the job; life experiences, not just in education helped me navigate the situation successfully; students of color respected me more and were happy I stood up for what was right; and students of color now felt like they had a role model that looked like them for once.

Nate claimed the following leadership skills were needed to navigate this crucible successfully:

Communication; being ego-less, or at least having my ego in check; patience; listening and having empathy (students and staff); understanding time and place; work with people, not over people; make sure you research the situation-ask questions to the people who have been there; trust my instincts; you don't know everything, continue to learn; trust your network; there's different ways to skin a cat; and watch people, emulate those who are successful.

Nate learned a lot from his positive crucible experience as a brand new lead principal.

The next two stories shed light on experiences principals have had in finding themselves as leaders, learning how to develop trust, and maintaining effective relationships. These stories prove principals don't always get it right their first time around, especially as a new principal. The first story discusses how a principal almost left the profession, but was able to adapt and grow as a leader to be successful.

Learning to Lead

Tyler had been at Honest High School for the past six years in two different assistant principal roles that virtually spanned the responsibilities across every dimension of leadership in the school. He was highly regarded as a good "nuts and bolts guy," but Tyler had not thought about moving into a lead principal role. Circumstances developed such that the position at his high school opened up and everybody kept telling him he was the logical guy to apply for it. A few weeks later he stepped into the role with open eyes and an open heart.

Within a month, Tyler was having second thoughts. He explained his feelings to his wife:

I was coming home saying, “I’ve got to get out of this job. This is the craziest job I’ve ever had.” I, honest to god, started looking for assistant principal postings. I was going to contact some friends; she ripped the phone out of my hand and said don’t do it now, just wait.

Tyler and his wife since have referred to that as the October syndrome. He reminds himself: September is the honeymoon; October is anything but. During that October, Tyler found himself thinking “Everybody else is nuts. Why aren’t people like me? Why don’t people see the world like I see it?” What he came to find out is not everybody else was like him. People operate under different personality styles or emotional intelligences. Tyler explained what he learned about himself during that month:

I was very much a westy, a nuts and bolts guy, and really good at that, but I would call myself a closet southy. I had deep feelings, but I wouldn’t let them out and they were affecting me deeply. I didn’t have a north bone in my body. Those are the folks that just love to jump off cliffs and see if they can fly, and I didn’t. Even though I talked a good game as an east person, I really wasn’t into being a visionary as much as I was into the day-to-day nuts and bolts.

Tyler learned the importance of recognizing the uniqueness of every individual he worked with.

He explained how he grew as a leader during this time:

I came to appreciate and understand others better. I developed my emotional intelligence and really found the beauty in the differences as opposed to the dissidents in the differences. Then, I realized if I was really going to be an effective principal, I’d better be able to play all four directions.

Tyler spoke to the magnitude of a learning curve he faced the first year on the job and how he had to work diligently to develop his skills as a “northy”; people that say “let’s get this plane in the air and see if we can fly it. If we can’t, let’s stop digging that hole and start digging another one.” He developed his skills as an “easty” by working hard to develop a sense of the big picture thinking and the whole concept of being able to communicate to people, and in turn, create a shared plan for the future. He also learned how to be more tactful and strategic in his leadership.

Tyler became a student of the game of leadership during his first year as principal by reading and listening to many books on emotional intelligence and the psychology of achievement. By continuing to learn, Tyler was able to better understand himself and develop his weaknesses or at least surround himself with people who were skilled in his weaknesses. This allowed Tyler to improve as a principal and create a more efficient team. As Tyler continued to grow, he faced another crucible experience in his development as a leader.

Vulnerability in the Principal's Chair

Tyler was working in an affluent district that always passed their levy referendums; the committee was always supportive, always saying yes, until they didn't. One November, they lost their first levy referendum, which meant budget cuts. Tyler received the news at about four in the morning and typed up an email to the entire staff. It was a "climb the mountain" message. He was trying to maintain a positive culture despite the noticeable setback by saying:

We can't do 27 things, but I bet we can do 23 things and we can do them really, really well. Let's get back on the mountain and let's get these 23 things done. We got each other, that's never going to change and we'll figure this sucker out.

To the credit of his staff, they just kept climbing the mountain, and they didn't have as many resources to do it with, but most outsiders couldn't tell the difference. They didn't show signs of the fact that they were victims of a levy failure. The culture was strong and the culture kept the climate strong. It was the perfect example of culture eating climate.

Fast-forward one year, four o'clock in the morning, Tyler's school district failed the second levy in a row. So, Tyler thinks to himself "what do I do?" He figured, the email worked last year, so why not again. So, he changed his message a bit, but still stuck to the "climb the mountain" mantra. Folks looked like they were doing what they were supposed to be doing, but the feeling was different. Tyler couldn't pinpoint anything specific, but the climate just felt

different. About three, four days later, Tyler's colleague with whom he had worked for about 20-some years came into his office and shuts the door. He said "Tyler, sit down. I need to give you some advice." Tyler sat down immediately and listened. The colleague said:

On behalf of the faculty, we really like you. We really like working on your team. We don't want to disappoint you. Right now, we're hurting. This second levy failure really hurt us big. What we need from you is we need you to tell us it's okay to hurt.

Tyler claimed to think, "Oh my god, how did I miss that one?" He called an emergency faculty meeting right away. He never anticipated what happened next, but he broke down in that faculty meeting; he cried in front of his entire staff. He felt like he had let his staff down and wasn't afraid to show it. He didn't know why he wasn't afraid to show it, but he couldn't keep from showing it:

Wow, did I learn a lesson that day. It was a lesson about trust. I define trust as being vulnerable, and I didn't realize until that day you don't teach trust. You don't teach vulnerability. The way people embrace vulnerability is when you are willing to be vulnerable. It starts with me. That morning, I was vulnerable. What I didn't understand is how vulnerable everybody else was because of the second levy failure. They were hurting. They saw me hurting and they heard me say "we're going to take however much time it takes to hurt together, we're going to fix it, we're going to fix our hurt, we're going to feel better and once we start feeling better, we'll get back on the mountain. Right now, though, we need to take care of each other."

Tyler was taught a lesson on trust that day, and he never forgot it thereafter. Tyler explained his mindset after that day when it came to being vulnerable:

If somebody needed to hurt, the first person who was going to hurt with them was me. If somebody needed to be vulnerable, it was going to be me first. Obviously, you have to pick and choose, because if you are vulnerable too much, they're going to think, "Well, what's this guy doing as a principal?" But, you get my point. You can't be afraid to be vulnerable. You can't be afraid of being afraid; you just have to have the courage to do it anyway. That's the lesson of trust.

Tyler's advice to novice principals who may experience this is if you experience a setback be ready to adjust and learn quickly. Learn fast and never forget it. If you find yourself in the

situation like Tyler where he was the last to realize the lesson, then be the first person to teach it to someone else who hasn't figured it out yet.

All of these stories articulate the experiences of “new” principals and how they learned how to lead a school effectively. The second section of this chapter highlights the importance of new principals creating and sustaining meaningful and ethical relationships with the superintendent and school board. These stories shed light on how new principals can get caught in difficult situations deciding to follow their moral compass or listen and follow their bosses directives.

Section Two: Challenges in Working with the Central Office and School Board Members

In this section, stories are shared of principals who identified a crucible experience while working with district level leadership teams, superintendents, and/or school board members. While each of these stories is different, the common link in every case concerned the principals' feeling that their jobs and personal leadership philosophies were challenged, questioned, and jeopardized. I begin this section with a story of a new principal who felt severely micromanaged by the superintendent and school board. The situation affected his health, and he was hospitalized due to the extra stress and anxiety.

Micromanagement of a New Principal

Ben was recruited to be the principal in a well-known and respected high school with a strong community. Immediately he started to realize the school board, teaching staff, and community thought they were doing great work, but in fact they were below average and the data was catching up with them. In addition, the district office was full of old school leadership that severely micromanaged their principals, especially at the high school, the flagship of the district. Ben claimed this made his job difficult:

The district level leadership really micromanaged me in the most severe levels you could imagine. Just brutal. For the first two years, as I moved ahead to make what I would call not incremental but fundamental changes in the organization, every time I would be stifled by district leadership. I suffered health wise severely for a couple years to the point where I almost left the job. Because what I had learned to do and what I was trying to institute was being so severely micro managed that it actually ended up in the superintendent's and board's office where I said, "I'm getting my resume out. You've got to back away; you've got to let me lead. You are paying me to do this, I can no longer be micromanaged." It was hurting my leadership style that I was seen as the mouthpiece of the boss.

As soon as Ben was hired he was directed by the school board and superintendent to review over 100 "mutual commitments," which was the school district's way of saying goals, in the first year. The school board members and superintendent showed up to school regularly unannounced, called the principal, and required him to attend multiple late night meetings to explain "where are we at with # x" of the mutual commitments or "how is # y coming along." When Ben brought an idea forward that he felt the school and the students "needed," in many cases the school board and superintendent turned him down because it was not a part of the mutual commitments plan. Ben began to experience push back from the teachers union as they thought his sole responsibility was to do as the district office told him and nothing else. Ben felt like he was a talking head and had not been given the latitude to lead like he knew how. He felt squeezed by district leadership and his building staff.

About two months into the job the superintendent and Ben were at the high school football game and the superintendent asked Ben, "So, how is the first year going?" Ben explained what happened next:

The superintendent said, "Ben, how is it going?" In my rookiness, I said, "Well I think pretty well. It'd be going better if you let me do my job." It was kind of tongue and cheek. He stopped, he looked at me, "What do you mean?" I said, "When people aren't happy about what's going on at the high school, I need you to direct them back to me. Now if they have already talked to me and are unhappy, then you are in there. You are in the skirmish. But when people call and they haven't spoken to me, you have to send them to my door. If you don't I cannot do my job well."

This conversation opened the door for Ben to be honest and reflective with his superintendent. Ben continued to forge forward with the mutual commitments, but also started to change the culture of the staff from a teacher centered to a learner centered building. He considered this movement evolutionary change, not revolutionary change. Ben explained the difference:

Think of revolutionary change like the revolutionary war, bodies left on the field. When changes are forced down people's throats, they will do it, but they will never be the same. I wanted to embrace evolutionary change where we look for research and we read the research together, and we grow and learn together. I wanted the school to become a learning organization.

This was Ben's big aha moment that fundamentally changed his direction. Ben empowered his employees to study the current research by reading the Marshall Memos and bringing ideas to his desk. He built social capital with the teachers, the superintendent, and school board for some of the initiatives he accomplished and his involvement with the community. Ben was asked to speak at national and international conferences, which helped the school board relinquish some of their control. Ben began to encourage the school board to help with recruitment and fundraising, which allowed Ben to implement new and innovative programs and practices at the school. In the end, it took about two-three years for Ben to feel like the school board and superintendent truly allowed him to lead. He never felt completely in control, which eventually led Ben to take another job, but this crucible proved to be valuable to his leadership development.

The process of managing a relationship with the superintendent and school board taught Ben "that learning is never done." Ben explained some of his key findings:

Through it all you've got to have that personal inventory of, this is a line I won't cross. Or, this is something that is so important that I just have to put everything else on hold. Some people refer to this thought process as is this the sword your willing to die on? If the answer is "yes" you must push forward.

Ben also expressed the importance of his personal network of people by stating: “Those people in your network help you reflect and get through the stressful situations.” He embraced the concept of understanding his marketing style and message as a leader, reiterating this message and philosophy to staff, students, school board members, the superintendent, and community members. The more he was consistent the less people questioned his leadership.

The last key learning Ben took away from this experience was that decisions needed to be driven by the research. Ben explained this “aha moment:”

It’s got to be research based. You can only rally the troops so many times from the heart. What I learned is you don’t ask people to take stuff off your plate, but if you can be successful at that, you build capacity in the organization for leadership, and that’s what it’s about. It’s about people that step forward going, “I got an idea, can I present this to staff?” I should have made the change earlier from monthly staff meetings where the principal stands up in front of everybody to teacher led improvement meetings.

When Ben was able to shift the culture from a teacher oriented culture to a learner’s culture, the school board and superintendent started to trust him more and give him more freedom. Ben claimed he used research on the Roger’s Adoption Curve to implement this evolutionary change in the building culture. The next story involves school board members and the superintendent asking the principal to engage in unethical practices.

Non-supportive School Board and Unethical Requests from the Superintendent

Mike was an up and coming principal in a small rural high school on the fringe of the metro area. He had a strong administrative team from the district level all the way through the principals across the district. The district was engaged in progressive work, they were all young in their careers, and they were having a lot of fun. The school board was governing, they weren’t micromanaging, and Mike thought, “A good school board is a governing board and not a managing board,” so he was happy. The school board was super supportive with the exception

of one board member. Then a school board election took place. Mike explained what happened during the election:

In that new election, the board became split. One [non-supportive member] was now three, so it was a four-three scenario where you had a very divisive board. You had four that were always together and three that were always together, but the four always won, which angered the three and that contingency of folks on issues. Slowly, as that bubbled and boiled, you had personal attacks between these board members, and as administrators you're just trying to navigate this. It's like, "Holy cow." One of the board members said, "I can't do this anymore. I live here; this is my community. You're not paying me enough money to be on the board to deal with this whole issue." He left, and now you had a three-three. Eventually the four-three became four on the bad side.

At the same time that was happening, Mike said there tended to be some daggers or arrows thrown at the various administrators. Once that happened, there was a significant shift in the superintendent. It became apparent that he was going to stick with the board versus supporting the work of district administrators and principals. Mike explained his thought process during that time:

When some of those arrows were being shot early on at various issues, administrators, coaches, there was the support of the board and superintendent that could deflect those arrows. Now if the superintendent shifts to where the arrows are coming from, and there's only three board members there to protect you, there's no shield and they're all hit. That's a tough spot to be in when you're not leading the district, you're leading a site, or a building, or a program, or whatever. Then, to make matters worse, these three remaining board members really started seeing the same thing and what used to be a strong bond and good working relationship with the superintendent, was now tarnished.

Mike was not particularly worried about the board attacking him, until one day there was a disciplinary action at the high school that based on past practice, required a particular student to be expelled for one year. Mike made the recommendation for expulsion to the superintendent and waited for the decision. However, this student's family was strongly aligned with a few new members on the board and they immediately started to identify flaws in the investigation of the issue (how they found out, why they did what they did. They didn't call the parent in a timely

manner, etc.). The superintendent and board decided to reduce the consequence for a fraction of the time that was common in past practices, but it did not stop there. Because of that incident, now it was, “Mike’s ruined my son’s life, he’s ruined my family’s life,” and every possible angle to go after the high school administration took place. The family of this child put intense pressure on the school board to discipline the high school administration. Mike explained the steps that transpired next:

I got called into a meeting with the current board chair and the superintendent. [I] had no idea it was coming. I got accused of years’ worth of wrongdoings and much of it was fabricated, some of it was out of context. I was floored. They asked me to put together an explanation for all these things. It was an hour and a half meeting. I walked out of there, it was like I got hit with a 2x4, and it felt wrong. It felt wrong because it felt like there was a lot of twisting of events, and issues, and concerns, and trying to create a story. They asked me to provide some feedback, so I did. I put together a packet probably an inch thick of supporting documents. We had a meeting set for two weeks later and just before that meeting I got called into the superintendent’s office and he said, “We’re not going to meet. We’ve hired an independent lawyer to investigate these allegations”.

As a young administrator Mike didn’t know what to think. He felt like he had been betrayed by a superintendent that used to praise him with statements like “you’re the greatest high school principal I’ve ever worked with,” to now being told, “you should probably get representation.” Mike was flabbergasted any of this was even being looked in to because most of these allegations were just daily routine tasks of a high school principal and would not typically warrant any investigations. Mike felt the school board was trying to punish him or eradicate him for doing his job, and the superintendent was not willing to stand up for him.

During the investigation the lawyer called people in from years back to interview them, had a public forum for people to express their opinions on the principal, and never once spoke to the Mike until the superintendent called him into a meeting. Mike explained what happened in the meeting:

I got called into the superintendent's office and he said, "You're going to get a letter of discipline in your file. We finished the investigation. As you know, in any contract you have a right to grieve the letter." I never got asked any questions; no one ever asked me anything. I never had a chance to respond, no attorney came and talked to me, nothing, just a letter in my file. In turn, another administrator got a letter in his file because they were both kind of related to the same incident. We called our representative and he laughed and said, "No, this is not normal."

Mike and his fellow colleague grieved the letter, but prior to going into the grievance meeting Mike was called into the superintendent's office and told, "I need you to accept this letter," Mike asked, "Why?" to which the superintendent responded, "You're tenured, I'm not. My contract's up in July. You can live through this, this won't affect you." Throughout the investigation the school board also had threatened the athletic director of the school to remove a coach because one of the school board member's relative was not playing. In addition, the superintendent asked the principal to redact a drinking violation suspension so a student athlete could participate in a big game that was coming up. Both of these acts were highly unprofessional and unethical. In the end, the arbitrator decided to expunge and destroy all of the documentation related to the accusation; Mike's disciplinary letter was destroyed. The district had pretty significant directives on the fact they went overboard on the investigation. Mike explained how he felt when it was over:

It kind of put me in a unique spot because they couldn't retaliate, and they knew that. It elevated my ability to navigate some things. I probably became a little more confident is not the right word, but maybe it is. I became a little more adamant with the superintendent on some issues, "No, we're not going to do that. Here's why." He knew he was out of options.

Mike learned a lot about himself personally during this stressful time, but also about the colleagues he was working with. Some of the lessons learned from this experience were: (1) "You can't control what you can't control-be okay with that. You're not expected to know the answers to everything"; (2) Be intentionally reflective in your practice-always work to improve;

(3) share your stresses with your significant other, don't try to hide things; and (4) put all your focus and attention into leading the building forward regardless of what's going on. Continue to push for higher expectations and achievement levels for students. Looking back on it now, Mike can laugh and discuss the situation with ease, but during the time Mike thought his job and future were in jeopardy. The next story involves a principal being asked by the superintendent to taint an interview process for an assistant superintendent job opening.

Superintendent Requests Principal Taint Interview Process

David was a new principal in a small rural high school with about 400 students. One night, a school board member called David and asked him to attend a private meeting with him and the superintendent. When David got to the meeting he was told the district needed to hire a new curriculum coordinator/ assistant superintendent and David would be in charge of the interview process. The superintendent was clear that they already knew who they wanted to hire, and it was David's job to make sure the people on the committee selected that candidate. The board member and superintendent told David they would be screening the candidates and selecting who received interviews. David explained his initial reaction after the meeting:

“Holy cow. I'm a brand new administrator.” I felt awkward and kind of like, “Wow. This is tainted. This is weird.” You go into what you're doing with the belief that there's a fair process and everyone gets treated the same, people coming in and walking through that door actually have an opportunity to gain employment. I think I was a little bit more afraid the first time. I wanted to make sure I took care of it and got it right. Then again, you're working with committees. You're at risk of challenging relationships with the staff you have on your interview team. If they're going after someone else or they see a candidate that they like, and then you're saying, as principal, “Nope, we're going with this other candidate.” They don't know what's going on behind the scenes with the board member and/or the superintendent.

David went through the interview process and selected the candidate the superintendent and board member wanted. What made the situation worse is that he knew the superintendent

had been having relations with the woman who received the job. He felt “gross” about the entire process and the worst part was he had to lie to one of his friends. David had encouraged one of his friends to apply for the position two weeks before he was notified that he was in charge of the interview process, and his friend did not even receive an interview. David had to tell his friend “there were a lot of qualified candidates and the committee felt they were more suitable for the position, sorry.” He knew in his heart this was a lie, but he also knew he couldn’t tell his friend the truth about the tainted interview process.

David discussed how his relationship changed with the superintendent after the tainted interview process request:

After the interview process, I did everything I could to stay away from the superintendent and not be involved with whatever it was he was doing. I just didn’t want to be a part of that stuff. I think, truly, there was a friendship when I started there with my boss, who by the time I left, there was nothing left. I don’t talk to him anymore.

David claimed this was not the only time he has been asked to taint an interview process, and he described how he handled the situation as he gained more experience:

When you’re a new principal and you get called in with a school board member and a superintendent, you’re just like, “Okay, I have to do what they’re telling me.” Even though it doesn’t feel right. After I gained more experience and had relationships in the district it was easier to voice my opinion and not just follow orders. Ethically, I think at times there are things where we have to draw the line in the sand if we’re being told to do something. Hiring, to me, it was a crucible experience because it’s very, very important. It’s one of the most important things we do as leaders. To have that process tainted, not truly being able to hire the right person for our students was challenging.

David learned a lot about what he does not want to do and become as an administrator through this experience. He claimed one thing he will never do again is taint an interview process. David expressed the other lessons he learned:

Other things I learned are these crazy events can go home with you and they will eat you up, but I think over the course of the years, you tend to understand that your family and your health are more important. You have to have that balance of this is a job and this is my family and this is my life. You need to have the balance of standing up for what you believe is right and following orders. You need to draw a line in the sand sometimes. You have to be able to stand up for yourself, and that takes a while to feel confident in doing that.

David experienced a difficult decision that could have affected his relationship with his boss, colleagues, and his potential career outlook. The next story is about a principal who was looking for district support while the media, community, and staff scrutinized her, but received nothing.

Lack of Support from the District Office Leads to Student Walkout

Erin had been an assistant principal at Fantastic High School for three years before taking over as the lead principal. She was passionate about equity work as her district demographics were shifting to include a more diverse population. She had been a part of the first major push in the district to start the journey of equity work, but realized it had not been a priority the last two years of her assistant principalship. One of her priorities as the lead principal was to continue the conversations around equity with her staff and students. Erin and a few of her teachers started reading books over the summer and attended a conference with a well-known equity consultant. Erin and her team felt comfortable with this consultant and decided to bring him to their school to help reignite the conversation.

As the staff began to have quality conversations about race, culture, religion, sexual orientation and how these aspects could affect a student while they attend Fantastic High School, there was pushback from the high school staff and a few incidents occurred that created a tense culture. Erin explained the first incident:

I had an incident in the hall with one of our hall monitors. She was a very angry woman and had been an angry woman for a number of years. The burnout was very clear and I don't know what happened, but one of our students who happened to be African American got physical and confrontational in the hallway with a different teacher, our police officer had to end up taking him to the ground and cuff him to get him under control. She was watching this happen in the hallway and began screaming, "This is a racist place," and "I'm going to the newspaper."

A few weeks later, another incident occurred with an African American volunteer that was working with a student group after school. The group was listening to a guest speaker in a teacher's classroom, after the session was over, the teacher came back to clean up his room and noticed his door was broken. The teacher flipped out and confronted the group to see who it was. Erin explained what happened next:

[The volunteer who was running the group] was very offended by the teacher's accusations and claimed he was "being racist." I made a huge mistake with her, which I've learned. I said, "I completely understand where you are coming from, however, I know that this was not racial." Well, I shouldn't have said that. I should have just said, "I'm sorry you feel that way," and just let her continue. Instead I had to say, "I think that this is about". She wasn't open; she didn't want to hear my opinion because I was disagreeing with her. In her mind it was racial, so it was racial. I learned that lesson.

After these two incidents occurred the volunteer and the hall monitor went to a local publicist to run an article on Fantastic High School and the racist acts that were taking place in the building. Erin invited the publicist to the school to see all the wonderful things the school was doing and to showcase the good, not the bad. The publicist denied her invitation and wrote the story as the volunteer and hall monitor described it. Erin and Fantastic High School were publicly described as a racist school and Erin's picture was front and center on the article.

As the next school year began in the fall, Erin scheduled the equity consultant into the staff's regular professional development. They started to make progress; the equity consultant coached the teachers on culturally relevant strategies during discussions about race and culture. The consultant helped the school set up a student steering committee that created an open and

honest space for all students about the inclusivity of the school and ways they could improve together. In the winter, Erin started to notice a staff member who wasn't fulfilling his contractual obligations. Erin explained the situation:

One of our staff members who had been there for a number of years, had not once in all the years ever put an absence into AESOP, ever kept a calendar, he didn't follow any of the professional expectations, like he was above them and the past principal never said a word to him about them. This man came and went; he would show up at twelve, leave at one. There was no calendar; he wouldn't let the secretary know. He wouldn't go to professional trainings or staff meetings. He would come and go as he pleased. Then I found out he was gone one time. He was like, "Oh, I was out sick," but he never put in an absence. So I started to give him specific expectations and started to hold him accountable.

This staff member was also part of a small contingency of people on the staff that Erin knew were not happy to be engaging in the equity work with the new consultant. This staff member and a few other people made it clear they thought the vision and mission should be centered on just the African American students because of the test scores, which didn't align with Erin's vision for improvement for all students.

At the same time a few staff members became upset about the consultant and Erin's overall vision of the school, a student diversity group put signs up all over the school for one of their events. Normally, if the students had received prior approval from an administrator for posting signs, it would not have been a problem, but in this case they hadn't done so, and the assistant principal took down all of the signs in the hallways. Erin explained what happened next:

Two students, whose parents are very well known in the community and around the state, came to the AP's office and he was standing in the doorway. They said, "We're coming in this office and we're getting are things, those are our signs." The AP said, "You can get them at the end of the day, but they have to go through our sign process to get approved. We're not against this group; you just need to go through the process like everyone else. "No, we don't have to," and the students pushed by our assistant principal, and shoved him, and he flew backwards, and put his hands up, and then the students started getting physically and verbally abusive in the office. The police liaison came around and said, "You guys got to calm down." It was a lot of screaming and it started to get aggressive, so our liaison got involved, and cuffed the students. The students got suspended for behaving like that and that was enough to start a big thing.

The two sets of parents who felt like their students had been wrongfully treated, and the small group of staff members who were not seeing eye-to-eye with Erin created a website and started to speak out about the racial nature of Fantastic High School and the district's superintendent. Within the next week, a sports team did a dress up day called "Gangster Day." The administrators did not approve of this and brought the students into the office and made them change, but the damage was done. Students and staff had taken pictures and videos of this group and made posts to their social media sites saying, "Fantastic High School is about Ghetto Spirit Days and the shaming of certain cultures." Things were spiraling out of control and Erin did not know how to stop them. District staff did not step in to assist her in regaining control of the culture, and, within the next few days, the students and a few of the rebellious staff members staged a walkout, invited news reporters, and prepared to make these incidents public. Erin tried to subdue the group and stop the walkout by having individual and group conversations with the students and staff, but they rejected her efforts. The students and staff walked out of the school in the middle of the day as the news channels recorded and interviewed the participants. Erin was flabbergasted and extremely distraught.

Erin claimed she cried some nights because she invested so much in her work, but her public image was so negative at the time. Many people knew she had a good heart and was

trying to enact a positive change, but this group was making life at work stressful. Erin did not feel she was receiving the proper support from her superintendent and district office either, who called her and said, “fix it” instead of saying, “how can we fix this together.” Erin felt alone and on an island:

Bottom line is this was a crazy journey, super emotional, and I think it was super personal to me. That’s one of the hard things in leadership because most things you kind of learn to just let them Teflon off of you, and you just keep on keeping on, and keep the focus on whatever your vision for the building is, and what’s best for kids, and just keep on steering those conversations, and having them as people jump off the train, and back on the train as they follow you or don’t follow you and your leadership, but it was super personal, it just buried me.

Erin learned a lot from this crucible experience as a relatively new lead principal. Erin explained what her initial reflective findings were from this entire experience:

I just kept persevering, I just kept showing up every day, I cried and ate a lot because I just felt like my god, this is what it’s like. I knew I was going to have to deal with some of it being in a school that’s diversifying so quickly in so many different ways. I knew the rules were different because I was a female and it was always a very male oriented school before me. I knew not being of color was going to be tough, which mattered. It was just very interesting, but I just kept showing up every day.

Erin continued to persevere by starting a student steering committee that worked to enhance the culture of the school. She requested permission to reassign a few staff members to different roles or different buildings in the district. She worked hand in hand with the building union representative to show solidarity to the staff, so it was a “we” culture and not a “me” culture. She clearly identified expectations and tried to maintain a sense of calmness and patience, even when the staff was hostile and wanted to know what was happening behind the scenes. She maintained her own personal emotions and started to identify her leaders. She used her consultants way of splitting people into the “believers,” “tweeners,” the new teachers who are not sure what camp to go to, “fundamentalists” who are just going to hate everything no matter what, and then the “survivors” who literally are just there for the paycheck, come and go,

and have zero investment. By identifying her leaders she was able to leverage their talents to enact positive change. Lastly, she learned, a strong leader must continue to push back on people about collaboration and continuity.

Erin eventually left Fantastic High School to get a clean start and engage in meaningful work with a superintendent in an up-and-coming district that she knew had her best interest at heart and supported her vision. The next story concerns a first year principal and a request from the school board/ superintendent to change the high school grading practices against his better judgement.

School Board and Superintendent Force a Grade Change Policy on a New Principal

Tom, finishing his first year at Winning High School, felt as though the year was running smoothly, until the school board asked him to attend the next school board meeting. During this publicly broadcast meeting, the school board asked Tom to “up the GPA scale” at the high school. Tom wasn’t exactly sure why they wanted to “up the grading,” but as a first year principal who wanted to keep his job and not ruffle any feathers, he complied. Tom set up a staff meeting to notify his colleagues that beginning with the next school year they would increase the GPA by two percentage points for every mark: an A, which used to be 94-100% would now be 96-100%; an A-, which used to be 90-93% would now be 92-95%. The scale continued all the way down to F, which used to be anything from 59-0% and now would be anything from 61-0%. The staff thought it was pretty odd to be changing the grading scale, but as it was the end of the school year they didn’t put up much of a fight and just continued to finish out the year strong.

Tom held multiple parent- listening sessions on the proposed GPA booster, but only two parents showed up. He thought this was extremely unusual, as he expected many more parents to show up to express their displeasure with the change, but they didn’t. Tom and his team

crafted communication messages to be sent to parents, students, and community members throughout the summer and received little pushback. Their message was centered on “having higher standards will get more of our students into prestigious colleges and universities.” Even though things were running smoothly, Tom knew deep down this initiative was not going to be successful. He claimed it was just a “ticking time bomb, waiting to explode.” As the school year began and teachers started to issue grades for mid-term, the phone calls, parent emails, staff complaints exploded. Tom’s bomb had just exploded in his face. He did not have enough time to answer all of the questions and felt his rationale was always against his better judgement. Tom went directly to the superintendent and pleaded with him to convince the board to let him change the grading scale back to what it used to be. Once the school board had received enough complaints, they agreed to let Tom abandon the failed initiative. Tom explained the steps he took to “bite the bullet” in the middle of first semester:

First, I sat down with the superintendent and made a plan with him that would satisfy him. I think deep down, he might have known the same thing was going to happen, and stepping forward was the right move. Second, I had to communicate to staff, students, and parents that, hey, we tried something different, it didn’t work. I’m sorry for any inconvenience that it’s caused. It wasn’t a full grade yet. It was going to become a grade later on, and our staff would fix the problem. Colleges don’t go by mid-term grades; they go by the semester piece. That’s how we changed it back. I just stepped up at the time and said, “Okay, I made a mistake. Let’s get this fixed,” and rotated the grading scale back to where it was.”

Tom claimed he learned a lot from this experience. First, it was important to admit that he was wrong, take the blame and never point fingers while moving forward. Second, he realized he had to have thick skin to be a principal because sometimes trying new things meant making mistakes, and, yet, continuing to persevere. Third, he learned to listen to his gut. If Tom were to do it over again, he would have raised his concerns to the school board throughout the summer. Those concerns included: parents not showing up to the meetings he convened, which

might have meant they either did not support the change or did not understand its significance, the purpose of the change was flawed, and there was no data supporting this type of initiative. Tom believed if he had more experience he would have had more confidence to do what his heart was telling him was right all along. Lastly, Tom learned owning up to his mistakes actually built stronger relationships with his staff, students, and community members. They appreciated the fact that he owned the mistake and apologized. Tom, as in many of the previous stories of “new” principals, had tried to survive instead of trying to lead.

Summary

Chapter four included ten stories of “new” principals who were faced with a difficult crucible experience. In each case, the principals felt their purpose, process, and ability was in question, which created points of deep reflection, stress, and soul searching. All of the principals involved with these stories have maintained their jobs or moved onto more challenging positions. In addition, all of the principals attribute their crucible event to making them stronger and more confident in their leadership ability as a principal.

CHAPTER FIVE: “SOONER OR LATER” PRINCIPAL PROBLEMS

While chapter four discussed crucible events that “new” principals have encountered, this chapter focuses on problems seasoned principals are bound to experience “sooner or later” throughout their career. These experiences could happen at any time during a principal’s tenure, making preparation for them difficult. These incidents taught the principals a lot about who they were as leaders and who they want to become moving forward.

I organized the data described in this chapter into four sections. The first section of this chapter describes student incidents that truly tested a principal’s ability to lead the entire organization. Participants described crucible experiences concerning (1) an equal access lawsuit, (2) student drinking violations and social media, (3) a student hazing incident (4) a student prank, leading to staff boycott of major school event, (5) a student dance and fight picked up by the media, (6) a student possession of a loaded gun in class, (7) a student legal battle over transfer policy, (8) a situation with out of control parents when their student got tough news, and (9) school climate issues when a new school opens in the district.

The second section describes the difficulties principals face when trying to implement change. Multiple participants described ten crucible experiences involving either (1) structural implementation changes and/or (2) attempts to change staff mindsets. These stories tested the leadership ability of the principal.

The third section describes experiences principals have encountered when making staffing decisions. Participants described crucible experiences including (1) removing probationary teachers, (2) removing a coach, (3) removing a teacher who was harming students, and (4) dealing with a hostile staff after a veteran teacher was forced into retirement mid-year.

The fourth section describes the rollercoaster of emotions principals face when dealing with tragedy and loss of life. Participants recalled stories of students passing away in multiple

formats including (1) school shooting, (2) murder, (3) school field trip, and (4) sudden student death. I begin this chapter with a story involving a veteran principal who was caught in an equal access lawsuit. Two student groups requested and were granted different communication platforms for their organizations, which sparked debate and criticism and left the principal on the hot seat.

Section 1: Student Incidents

Equal Access Lawsuit

One random day, a group of students who were a part of the school's gay/straight alliance club approached Keith, the principal at Pinnacle High School, with a request. The students wanted to conduct an awareness week about what it is like to be a gay student. Keith discussed the idea with the advisor of the group and the building administrative team; all responded with, "Absolutely, we need to give them this opportunity." Keith explained what happened next:

I didn't put very many parameters on the kids about what they could do other than say, do it like the last group. We cut them loose. They put together some PA announcements, some posters. They had an informational table at lunch.

On Wednesday of the gay/straight advocacy week, Keith started to field phone calls from parents and community members about the inappropriate nature of the group and the school choosing to endorse their message. Keith started to think, "Oh, people are talking to each other." The superintendent, then the board called Keith basically saying, "Okay, we got a thing here." By early the next week, Keith had been summoned to appear in front of the superintendent and school board. They instructed him to take down all the signs and bring them to the board meeting. According to Keith, "They wanted to see what this thing looked like." Keith explained his thought process over the weekend:

I spent the weekend getting ready to answer the questions that I anticipated I was going to answer. Thinking through, rehearsing to myself, am I going to make sure and say it the same way to them that I've been saying it to everybody else. I have a strong suspicion that there're members of that board that are hearing from these same people that are talking to me. That may come across as a little paranoid, but I just had some fears, concerns that there are some allies forming against this idea from the community with members of the board.

At the board meeting Keith was instructed to hang the posters up on the wall and answer the barrage of questions from board members. Keith felt like he was "on trial." Keith explained his thought process during the meeting:

What I was feeling and thinking was I knew on the board, who I had as a supporter and who I didn't. Not through any conversations, just my sense of their own personal agendas. At that time our board was pretty politicized. There were a couple people I gave them, just handed them a gift of okay you get to increase your profile with this item. Depending on who asked the question how I felt was, okay I can relax and answer this question or I have to be on guard when I answer this question. It just depended on who I was talking to. I remember distinctly feeling that way. I could feel my back hunch up responding to one person versus my shoulders drop when I'm responding to another.

After the board meeting, things went back to normal until a religious group approached Keith a few weeks later and asked to have an advocacy week promoting and informing students about their group. Keith explained the interaction:

After that, there was clearly what was designed to be another request by students who were looking to do something around religious clubs. Looking to do the almost exact same thing that I'd approved for the gay/straight alliance. What I said to them was, "As a club, you can do certain things but some of the promotional items like PA announcements and things like that, we're going to have to be a little bit careful, because we've got an establishment clause, where we need to be careful in effect appear as a school, we're not endorsing a particular religion."

As a result of Keith putting tighter parameters on the student group, an adult advocacy group from Texas put together an equal access lawsuit and sent Keith a letter. He immediately looked the group up online and realized it was a real thing. Keith turned the letter over to the district office and their legal counsel. Keith described the events after the letter:

An advocacy group for religious rights sued the district, because I didn't provide equal access. This issue, obviously had legs. It kept going and going. I ended up dealing with it all year and into the next. The issue didn't actually get resolved until after I left the school to take a new job. District lawyers represented us against that claim. We had to sit down and walk through the whole incident. What did I do right? What did I do wrong? How do we form a policy moving forward? How do we use our policies to justify the decisions that I made? Do we have legal ground to stand on?

The entire experience was stressful, but the following year the gay/straight alliance came back to Keith and wanted to replicate what they had done the previous year with another advocacy week.

Keith explained the interaction:

The gay/straight alliance came to me again and said, "Can we do what we did last year again this year?" We had to put some restrictions on it to have it fall within the guidelines that would allow us to say yes to any group, including religious groups, to be able to promote themselves on campus. Because of that, then they lawyered up and brought suit against the district, claiming that we restricted their access simply because they were a gay/straight alliance.

After the district had been sued twice over equal access and Keith had many conversations with district and legal personnel who questioned his decision-making process, the nightmare was over. When reflecting on the experience Keith stated:

It just became so legal. We had to be really sure and careful about how we responded to things. Everything was thought to be on the record. People were calling, I'd have to say, "Pardon me, do you have kids here? To whom am I talking?" I became more aware of what was going on.

Keith explained what he learned from the experience:

I think a big thing I've learned since then, which has served me so well since then, is much like a chess game, think four moves or five moves down the road, instead of the one or two moves that are right in front of you. I think that I would have, knowing what I know now, even if at that exact same time, being approached by these kids, I would have worked much more closely with them about the parameters of which we would have done that. It was like I unleashed some kids that had felt invisible. It was like finally we get to express ourselves. Well they did. It's like even the posters and things like that, it was like a pep fest almost, the way that they approached it. I would have put some parameters on how they accomplished what they wanted to accomplish, so that the next group that comes in that says, we want to do that, I could say, "Yes, do it the exact same way."

The learning for Keith was “when you’re rash about it, just think things through. How do you get to something that allows those kids to feel a part of the school without subjecting the school and yourself to all this stuff?” Keith believed that in the end, the equal access lawsuits distracted from the original purpose, which was to acknowledge these kids exist in school hallways, and they deserve to be here as much as anybody else. The next story involved another incident in which Keith was able to use some of the lessons learned in the equal access experience to benefit him in an incident involving student drinking violations and Facebook.

Facebook Pictures Lead to Media Coverage, School Walkout, and Student Suspensions

Keith left Pinnacle High School to be the lead principal at Big Time High School, which had one of the largest high school student enrollments in the state. Keith’s position was considered high profile because of the strong community commitment and volume of students. In the early 2000’s, when Facebook was just starting to become well known, Keith and his administrative team received an anonymous DVD in the mail of nearly a hundred pictures of their students pulled off of Facebook with an anonymous note. The note stated: “You’ve got a bunch of kids who are breaking high school rules by drinking and it’s documented in these pictures, and you’re not doing anything about it.” Keith and his administrative team convened a meeting to discuss their next steps:

We had a decision to make. Decision number one is what to do with anonymous information like this. Maybe armed a little bit from that last experience, but this is an example of thinking several moves down the road. Kind of like, let’s walk down the scenario path of if you don’t do anything with it, how does that play out? As a school, you’ve been informed that kids are violating state high school league rules. You’ve got some pretty clear evidence here, that probably somebody still has copies of that they could produce someplace else, and you sweep it under the rug. Point number one was okay, we’ve got to do something about this. All right, so decision point number two is what? What do you do with this evidence? There are some pictures where it’s like okay, that’s clearly a violation. For example, when a kid is drinking a bottle of Jack Daniels’, that’s a violation. The kid standing there holding a red cup, you don’t know what’s in that red cup. You assume but you don’t know, so what do you do with that?

Keith and his administrative team of assistant principals, the athletic director, and deans sat down and went through every picture to determine (1) who the student was and if they were a student at Big Time High School, (2) if it was a clear violation or not, and (3) if the students were involved in extracurricular activities. With the exception of one picture, it was pretty clear all of the violations happened outside of school. There was one picture where they were able to identify a violation on a school field trip, which was treated as a school violation and the students received a three -day suspension from school. All of the other pictures that clearly identified students in possession of alcohol received a State High School League violation under bylaw 205 “Unbecoming to a student athlete,” which resulted in a two game or two week suspension from the activity, whichever is the greater suspension. If the students did not have a clear violation, the administrative team called home to tell the parents: “We want you to know that we were given this picture. Here is the picture. Here’s what it depicts. We want you to know about it. There’s not school action. We’ll offer resources if you’d like around substance abuse if interested.”

Keith explained the process the administrative team went through to gain more information:

If it was a clear violation, we decided to show the picture to the student and their parents and inform them of the penalty. If it wasn’t a clear violation, we sat down with the student and ask them what the picture depicted. We told them what the penalty would be before they answered. If we found out later on that they lied to us in the answer, we doubled the penalty, which the policy allowed us to do. We invited the students to be honest with us. Clear violations were not an issue. The issue was the red cups and what was in them. Some kids admitted. Some kids didn’t. I don’t know who was telling the truth.

Keith and his team went through everybody. They were strategic about the fact that they knew the minute they interviewed the first kid, word would get out and the other students would all clam up. They were strategic about the order in which they interviewed kids. They started with

the kids for whom they had the highest suspicions, who might have violations, and divided it up. They tried to interview as many students as possible at the same time or in a relatively close window of time, so that as soon as they were done with them, they had the next students ready. As a result, they didn't have kids passing stories on to one another in the halls or over texts, which could have tainted the investigation.

In the middle of the investigation, somebody contacted Channel 5. Channel 5 called Keith and said, "We understand that there are hundreds of kids being suspended from Big Time High School for Minnesota State High School League things." Keith responded, "I'm clear on seeing what your understanding is. I'm not going to talk to you about that." The reporter pushed back with, "Well is it clear that kids are being suspended?" Keith followed up with, "We are in the middle of investigating and I'm not going to share any of that with you." That night they had a home basketball game and Channel 5 came to the game and started interviewing students. At the time, the administration had not made a public statement to the students or families, other than the families of the students involved, but the students had heard about the investigation through the social pipeline. The students believed hundreds of their peers were being suspended; so, that is what they said to the news reporters. Keith explained what happened next:

The next morning what goes on TV? Hundreds of kids being suspended from Big Time High School for Facebook. Here's how big this gets. It gets so big, I get a call from the producer of the Dr. Phil Show. They wanted me to come on and talk about Facebook. Parents didn't go on Facebook at the time. They didn't even know what it was. Kids knew what it was, and they were sharing stuff. They thought it was safe, that it was a safe place. I told them, "That's not the story. The story is about teenage drinking, which has been around for ten thousand years." Then, I got contacted by another group that wanted to talk about managing social media with young people; so, I did an interview with them. It was national news. To make matters worse, the following day at a hockey game the opposing fans all held red cups in the air and were making chants about our school. It took on this life of its own that the rumor was if you're holding a red cup, you were suspended.

Throughout the week the media showed up at the school and school events. Keith explained what he had to do to troubleshoot the media:

The news channel kept showing up at school trying to interview students. I had to go out there and say to him, "You're on campus. You're trespassing. You've got to get off." They've got their trucks set up with their big antenna up. He goes, "Oh geeze, it's going to take us forty-five minutes to take this big antenna down." I said, "It took you fifteen minutes to put it up. It'll take you fifteen minutes to put it down. Get off campus." I'm walking away now, "you're off campus in fifteen minutes. I haven't talked to the police yet, but they're right there so you decide what you want to do. We've got radio stations, that some of our kids got caught up in the fact of, oh cool I get to interact with the media. While we're managing this thing that involved that set of students, what was even bigger was managing the way the media handled it.

In addition, at the time the students still believed anybody with a red cup got suspended, so they organized a walk out to protests students being suspended for holding a red cup. The group was organized on Facebook and the administration had a difficult time figuring out who organized the walkout and identifying the leaders. Keith explained what happened next:

We get to the leaders of this walkout and say, "I understand the rumors you're hearing but what you're protesting didn't happen." They still wanted to do their thing because they were getting texts from this radio station saying, "We're out here. When you leave, walk out here. We'll interview you because we want to cover it." The students gathered in the cafeteria and it got packed. The plan was to have every student grab a red cup and walk out of school. I said, "Okay, here's your chance. If you're going to walk, go. I want you to know right off hand, it's going to be an unexcused absence. There are school consequences about that, but you're big and brave, and want to walk, walk. Walk now. For the rest of you, go back to class." Three kids left. It was a big hullabaloo, three kids left. They left at the same time that our kids go to VoTech, so it looked bigger than it was, the media still covered it.

It took the administrative team a little over a week to complete all of the interviews and conclude the investigation. Then the administrative team put together a public statement that summarized the incident, the actions that were taken, and even how many students ended up receiving suspensions or state high school league violations, which in the end was around fifteen, way below one hundred. Two families challenged the decision made by the administration and

demanded a follow-up meeting to discuss the legal precedents of the decisions. Keith explained the first meeting:

When we had our first family meeting, we were able to reconcile the fact that this is the action we're taking. That ended up being a really happy ending in the end. That kid ended up being able to finish the season. That kid and I were able to connect right as that season ended. It was just a great thing. The student and parent handled it very well.

As the first meeting concluded the second meeting began, but had a different tone. Keith explained the second meeting:

Another family challenged it all the way through. In the end, frankly they lied. It was clear he was holding something illegal in the picture. The angle they took was that it happened out of season. It didn't matter to us because he had signed a code of conduct. Then the family manufactured a story. Their story didn't line up. We had to confront them with their lie. All of that's going on while the dad is out of town. The dad comes into town and now wants to have his own meeting, so we bring him in. We go through everything and the issue is put to bed when I say, "Okay, now we got this all taken care of. I hear that you disagree but this is the action that we're taking and here's why. We have all the evidence we need. Do whatever you need to do with it but we'll prevail. By the way, you deserve to know this. I haven't shared this with your wife yet. One of the pictures was her playing beer pong with a bunch of kids in your basement." He looked at the picture. "Okay, thanks." Never heard from him again.

The crucible of this incident wasn't necessarily the issue; it was the public nature of it.

Having to remain silent when everyone wanted answers was difficult for Keith. The media grabbed the narrative and told a false story, and until the team was done with their investigation and could issue their statement they couldn't say or do anything. It felt like an uphill battle and even after the statement to families, students, and staff was issued the narrative had already been told by the media that it was difficult for people to believe the administration. Keith explained how he had to handle the ending of the story:

Because you're prudent about your process. You have to say to your community, you have to believe that this is actually the narrative, but because they've got a bigger barrel of ink than you do, there's always the question about because that story came out first, this is probably your way of trying to counter that story. Nope, this is actually what happened. My phone was constantly lighting up from people who don't even associate with our school. Ninety percent of them in support of what we're doing. Ten percent of them told me to leave the kids alone. The crucible wasn't the event, it was how public it became, and managing the public nature of the work.

Keith learned through the process that operating as a team and sticking together proved extremely valuable. It allowed the team to make sure all of their t's were crossed and i's were dotted before making a final decision on each picture/student. Keith still believed his team handled it the best way they could have. He explained the final takeaway message from this incident:

I think if you rush into it, everybody's going to try to tell you that the thing they want you to do is urgent. If you are thoughtful, it's a chess game. If you can think five moves down the road, what you do here, you will be better served by what you do there in anticipating that fifth or sixth move down the road.

Keith's stories proved to be multifaceted. Kyle just like Keith, experienced a situation that seemed to grow tentacles when he dealt with a student hazing incident that led to major media coverage and legal battles.

Student Hazing Incident Leads to Media and Legal Coverage

Kyle was the principal of Courageous High School when he was presented with information about a student-hazing incident. Kyle explained how he received information about the incident:

We had two different parents come up and tell the head coach, and the activities director that day, with their sons present, that in the wrestling room, kids had shoved broomsticks up their butt during our football practice. That was probably about 8 or 8:30 in the morning, and by 9:30, 10 o'clock, I had contacted the superintendent to come over, and we assembled our admin staff, and we started to discuss what we had. We found out that we had a legitimate concern to start investigating. I can remember bringing in cabinet members, the assistant superintendent, the director of human resources, our communication person at that time. All internal people into our principal's conference room, and discussing, what do we know just from those two conversations with parents? One player happened to be black, and one was a white. We were sitting on, in essence, a bomb that was getting ready to go off.

The team of administrators and district leadership gathered in the high school conference room to discuss their plan of attack over the next five hours, 10 hours, 24 hours, and next five-seven days. They broke the timeframes down into sections to make sure they were thorough and did not miss anything. The team created 10 questions they asked every single player on the football team, anyone in the room with an administrative license was involved with the interview process, so they could interview the team in an efficient manner, trying not to taint the process.

Interviewers were free to auger down and get more information from the students, but the 10 questions made up an outline to follow. The football coaches were instructed to have their afternoon practice inside, so the students could be easily accessible and without their phones.

Kyle explained the interview process:

The football team had film that afternoon, so we started taking them 1 by 1, and they were still in their football uniforms, so they didn't have their cell phones on them. Once they were released, they were walked back down to the locker room, and practice was over, we told them to go home. That started the fireball of information, and we couldn't get out in front of that fast enough with the media. Kids were talking, the media was calling. They wanted to know the issues and the circumstances. The spokesperson was the superintendent. Nobody else was to speak to the media. The police were also involved.

Upon completing the interviews it was determined that there were students who had primary and secondary involvement. Because of the number of student athletes involved with the hazing incident, the decision was made by the superintendent to suspend the football team.

The suspension lasted until the investigation was over, which was approximately four or five days. No practice. No coaches could come on property, no nothing. The school board then got involved, because it became a political and contentious issue. Students, interviewed by news media, implied “they’re screwing us over.” The decision by the collective administrative group was to follow the policies and procedures with regards to student discipline, meaning the first level of offense would be two games, two weeks, whichever is greater. It was consistent with what we felt had been done in the past. The next day there was a closed school board meeting to discuss the situation and the disciplinary consequences for the student athletes. Kyle stated what happened at that meeting:

I can remember going to a closed school board meeting a day later, and we presented our information; we talked about the student athletes that were involved. Who were the key players? Who were the victims? Some were double, both players and victims. The school board said, “We’re going to suspend four of these players indefinitely. They’re done. The sport of football is over.” I can remember the AD saying “that’s very harsh, and that’s beyond our normal procedures,” and the school board said, “We don’t care. This is what’s going to happen, and they’re done.” There were a host of others that got four game suspensions, and a couple others got two game suspensions. The captains were stripped of their captaincy; it was a cluster. We had probably eight-ten players that were affected in some way, shape, or form. When that was released, and then finally, the superintendent, allowed the team to start again, the firestorm continued with the media.

Kyle explained the meetings with parents and students after they delivered the consequences:

I can remember damn near every one of those conversations. We had parents waiting outside our office. We spoke to the kid first, and then the parents. A lot of swearing at us. The AD and I had to really make sure that we protected the due process, and also student confidentiality. We could not speak about how we received the information, or who we received it from. It was crazy with regards to the amount of emotion people had. I’m driving into work the next day, and I’m listening to KQ on the radio, and one of the dads of the players that was suspended for the entire season is on there, telling the listeners of KQ how [Courageous] High School screwed his kid over of a full football scholarship for child’s play.

Kyle and his team intentionally used Minnesota State High School League bylaw rule #205 “unbecoming to a student athlete,” because that didn’t allow those students the opportunity

to have an interview, or appeal - they wouldn't be allowed to be heard by the State High School League. After the consequences were issued there were four to five families that kept coming back to the school demanding more information. Kyle stayed in constant contact with the school attorney, with documents, and conversations. One of the difficult parts for Kyle and his administrative team was that they agreed with some of the consequences the school board issued, but they didn't agree with all of the decisions. Nevertheless, Kyle and his team had to defend the decision to families. They made sure to not throw anybody under the bus with regards to those discussions.

After Kyle and his team were done with the firestorm of the players and the parents, while still trying to finish the football season, the attention got turned to the football coaching staff. Kyle explained what happened next:

We started to discuss the coaches' role. What was their responsibility? Where were they and where was the supervision? Next thing you know, there were a couple of coaches that should've been there that weren't. The school attorney and the HR department ultimately determined that some coaches needed to be suspended without pay for a period of time. Then the union grieved it, and we ended up having arbitration.

Kyle remembered getting called to the stand during the arbitration hearing and being asked by the union attorney if "he thought the punishment was fair?" He had to look at five staff members in the eye "yes, the suspension is fair." Since the incident two of the staff members retired, but three are still working as teachers in the building. Kyle felt bad that the head coach ended up getting punished because he wasn't even in the locker room when it happened. The coach had made the supervision schedule, had told the coaches where to go, had told the assistants where they had to be, and yet ultimately he got caught in the crossfire.

Upon the conclusion of this crucible event, Kyle, the administrative team, and the coaches reflected on what they could have done differently, and they decided to revise their captaincy/ leadership program. The leadership program now teaches student athletes eight or

nine key areas of leadership and they must go through a specific program to apply to be a captain. The idea is to create a positive environment for student athletes that is safe and functional.

Kyle and his team learned a lot from this incident. Kyle explained one piece of their learning:

From the principal's side of it, it's courageous leadership. You have to do it; we did what we had to do. It's what's right for the safety of all of our kids. It's not one or two kids, but all of our kids. You have to be able to defend that, and I was able to defend that to the team. What was frustrating was that we could never get ahead of the story being told. Had the community known what we knew with regards to the story, they would've acted much different. You learn really quickly, and that's probably from previous experiences, that you uphold the privacy expectation. If you don't, you're going to have the school attorney talking to you, and you do not want to become the brunt of that.

In addition, Kyle and his team learned throughout the process they should have gone back and repeated what they asked the students, their answers, and they should have had them sign the Tennessean notes document. If they had done that, it would have made the parent meetings much easier to orchestrate.

In addition, Kyle learned the importance of taking on some of the responsibility even if he didn't have a piece in the puzzle. He explained in greater detail:

There's always a reflection component of once the sting is over and the superintendent asks, "How are we going to make this thing better?" You can't just look out the window, "It's all their fault, it's the coach's issue." No, you're going to have to do both the mirror look and the out the window look, and start talking about what could we, what could I do differently as a building leader, to make our sports better? To make sure that we don't get to this point again down the road. What is my influence on the activities director, and all coaches? That we make sure that we have a good understanding, or we have policies and procedures in place, with regards to never letting this take place again. What you learn is that you just can't say, "Damn coaches did this." No, ultimately it's in my building; I'm responsible for that. You have to be mindful of that, when it comes to that reflection component.

Kyle and his team learned how a student incident can identify some areas for growth in school programming. The next story describes how Steve handled his staff boycotting a school event due to a student prank.

Staff Boycott of School Event Due to Student Prank Goes to the Media

Steve, principal of one of the most affluent and political high schools in the state, and his administrative team had been working on tightening up building expectations and increasing accountability on student behavior. The day before winter break, a group of students decided to orchestrate a prank that building staff members resented. Steve explained the prank:

Fewer than 50 students were disruptive on the final day of school before winter break, and by disruptive I mean they were running through the building throwing eggs, making noise, drawing attention to themselves. It probably lasted less than 10 minutes, maybe more like 5.

Because it was the last day before winter break and Steve and his administrative team did not have enough information to discipline students (video cameras were not in the hallways yet), they decided to let the event go. However, many staff members emailed Steve or talked to him face-to-face about their displeasure with how the situation was handled. Steve did not think it was going to be a major event until he received notification from the teacher union that no teachers would be attending the end of the semester celebration, which was a large standing tradition for the school and community two days into winter break. Soon after the teachers' union notified Steve of the decision, he started to receive an onslaught of phone calls and emails from the media. Steve explained the controversy:

I think there are always a lot of perspectives. The principal has perspectives from multiple inputs. Everybody can have their own personal opinion about a situation, but a principal or a leader is in a position to hear everybody's perspective. It's a little bit like being a judge in that your opinions have to go on the shelf. Then you have to take a look at okay, what's everything that we know? Then how can I use that information to make the best possible decision that I can? Then you make that decision, and then as is the case, anytime you have some type of controversy, some are going to buy it, some aren't. I think the nature of the consequences can drive part of that. Some think that people can learn from lesser consequences and some feel that you should go to the max. I think there was a feeling that if kids are going to behave this way, maybe they shouldn't be allowed to attend the celebration. That's really the controversy that evolved.

Steve and his administrative team had approximately two to three days to create a plan B for the end of the semester celebration. Realizing this event is a big part of the community and school, the team had difficulty creating any sort of plan that had no teacher involvement or support. The media flocked to this incident and interviewed students, staff, and community members focusing on the negative behavior of a small group of students, which Steve thought was "not an accurate portrayal of the student body." Steve spent a lot of time trying to control the media through his conversations:

I think it's important to be open with the media. There are key talking points that you want to create and stay to the script. I think one thing I did that was helpful is I took responsibility and accountability for what happened. I think as leader you need to do that and that's the right thing to do. Even though it may not be your fault or it may not be something you did that was really stupid or dumb, which I think in my case was not the case, I was just doing my job and I just made a decision and then you live with how it unfolds. It didn't work out very well. I'm not sure any decision I would have made would have. I think it was you're faced with a situation where there are multiple right answers. You have to eventually just choose one, live with it, and then move on.

Steve acknowledged the hardest part of the entire experience was his staff turning their back on him and not supporting him in a difficult situation. He was left to lead on his own, or with a small number of administrators and counselors. Steve explained how this experience made him feel:

You know, I think that was probably what made this a more intense experience for me than anything I've ever experienced before. I learned there are a lot of things you can't control. I think up to that point I had always felt that I could outwork anything on the front end to prevent it. I think I learned in this situation that you can't always do that. You can't always have it all figured out with foresight to know what the right decisions are or what all of the emotions might be around a situation that happens. It was a new learning for me. That's what made it an intense learning. You become your own worst critic on how could I have done something different or better to have prevented this? You really go through this time of self-doubt and soul-searching and questioning and full range of emotions that can be a part of a significant event like this.

Steve needed to lean on his leadership skills to get through the crucible experience successfully.

Steve described the leadership skills he tried to utilize throughout the event:

Resilience, commitment to remain professional, take responsibility as a leader. Hold myself accountable for fixing it and making it better. Collaborating with constituents who offered to help, which was perhaps one of the positive findings was who stepped up to offer a hand to put the train back on the track, which was very reinforcing and encouraging. Recognition that no one wanted all this to happen the way it did. Ironically, these types of situations maybe sometimes need to get worse before it can get better. It definitely got worse and it definitely got better. It was a catalyst for change and it provided me as a leader a bit more license to ramp it up.

Steve recognized that going through this crucible might have made him a stronger leader in the end:

The great thing about having gone through a crucible experience like this is that you get flame tempered to a whole new tensile strength where any of those things that you experienced before that prepared you for something like that and all of a sudden you don't feel like they were all that significant anymore.

Steve believes different personality types handle crucible experiences differently, but if a leader cares deeply about his or her work and the signature quality of that work, these types of experiences can be some of the worst thing that can happen; seemingly, everybody criticizing that work. Steve recalled what he was thinking after the event:

When you're your own worst self-critic, you think everybody in the whole world is thinking about this the same amount you are, scorning the leader as much as you are yourself. You can really commiserate and feel absolutely terrible and lousy about it. You wonder, how did I turn from being a good and I think respected leader yesterday into someone that can be so scorned and bring in so much negative attention? That's what your own mind I think does inside if you haven't had experiences like this before to know this is temporary, you'll get through it, and better days are ahead. When it's the first time, it's pretty significant.

In addition, Steve discussed the importance of surviving that first crucible as a principal, reflecting that individuals who have not experienced such a serious challenge might think their career will never be the same; that they may not be able overcome the repercussions of the events. He believed this concern is a natural component of the reflection that takes place after a crucible. Steve explained this concept:

I think if you over-analyze it and it's all you can think about because you don't have any experience to draw from. I think after you've been through this, you know that the sun will rise tomorrow and you'll have some new opportunities to demonstrate your leadership. I think it's key not to lash out or place blame on others or not to take responsibility for it. That's what you sign on for. You hope you don't have to go through this. It's a lousy way to get an education, but it's been a big part of my own professional learning. I don't think I can say that I've experienced anything quite like it. I can't say I haven't had other intense situations or maybe even some of those that have been as intense as this.

In addition, Steve's frame of reference changed as a result of having been through the experience. Steve explained his rationale:

Things tended to look differently or less severe or less insurmountable after I went through this event. Maybe it built some confidence in knowing that this isn't going to end my career and I don't have to go get reeducated to do something entirely different. I think people respect a leader who can stay in the saddle and just keep riding the horse through these tough times because I think the tough times are temporary. Younger, less experienced leaders like I was at the time don't necessarily know that.

When asked how aspiring principals should prepare to experience a crucible, Steve stated:

That's a great question. I think it's hard to prepare for it until you're beyond it. That's when the learning occurs when you reflect and you're doing your best to be responsive. I think to know about it and to at least have general awareness and knowledge about it is good, because it is a real thing. It is an opportunity. It probably won't feel like that during the experience, but it's an opportunity for tremendous growth. It really converts that aluminum core to steel and provides an opportunity to really grow in your own self-reflection, your self-awareness, and just that confidence level that when the wheels come off, I've done this before, I can grab the wheels and I can bolt them back on and continue on. It's part of leadership. It's part of what we do.

Steve believed going through these experiences might help improve leadership capacity:

Crucibles help you get better at using foresight and anticipation to head things off. I may have learned when I needed to shorten timelines to bring forth change and when there's more opportunity or patience for it. Leaders that haven't experienced a crucible, or if they don't know if they've experienced it or not, probably haven't, then I just think they need to know this could come at some point and it probably will. You just don't want to quickly think that you need to cash in your chips and go do something else or give up or quit or this isn't worth it. I think you need to learn from it and just know that probably almost every leader that is respected or has accomplished something has been through this. Ironically it's probably a big part of why they were able to accomplish stuff and move on to other positions and continue growing in their career and make significant contributions. A lot of the research around this whole topic suggests that that's an essential ingredient to excellence in leadership. You can only get it through experiencing it.

Steve explained that every day educational leaders face challenges, and to keep a good perspective, leaders should develop, maintain, and foster effective relationships with constituents. Working hard and demonstrating a sincere interest in doing the right thing are prerequisites to help leaders get through these types of first time crucible experiences. Effective leaders learn and constituents respect and appreciate someone who is willing to fight through the tough and hard times to bring forth change, even though they may not communicate that respect and appreciation at the time. It does not help an organization to drive a leader out because something bad or unpredictable, maybe even uncontrollable, happened. It does not enhance an organization's reputation to make the leader involved look bad, or look dumb, or look incompetent when some combination of unique ingredients just happened to come together at the right time or the wrong time that caused the "wheels to come off." The trick, the key, Steve

thinks is to work hard to put the wheels back on. People will see that, and they'll respect that. They will allow the principal to grow from that and survive it. Steve survived a crucible involving the media and a student incident. Our next story also involved student incidents - an inappropriate guy/girl dance and a student fight - leading to media coverage.

Student Dance and Fight Leads to Media Coverage

Harry had been an elementary principal for many years and was asked by the superintendent to move into the lead high school principal's role at Success High School. Harry had known the traditions of the high school during Homecoming week, but never really understood the complexities until he started to work at the high school. One of the traditions that had been going on for years was the senior boys dance during the pep fest. Harry had been warned that the dances are usually pretty raunchy, so he previewed the dance with his assistant principal the day before, gave it the thumbs up, and they went on with their day. However, the next day's pep fest did not go as Harry expected. Harry explained what happened:

We are at the pep fest, 1400 kids in the gym, last half hour of the day. The senior boys did the R version of the dance instead of the PG-13 version. It was horrible. It was completely unacceptable. I'm standing on the gym floor in front of the entire staff and 1400 kids watching this. Kids are videotaping it, putting it on YouTube. The pep fest is over. I'm thinking, "Oh gosh. Now what? I'm furious." I'm trying to contain myself. 1400 kids empty out of the gym out onto the grassy area where the buses go, and a huge fight breaks out. This is a donnybrook. This is like eight against eight, a totally different group of students. The senior boys' dance is white, affluent, privileged kids. The kids that get invited to be in the senior boys' dance are the popular, "I'm going to Georgetown" kids. The kids that are in this fight are rough kids.

Harry and his administrative team spent most of Friday night deciding on discipline and talking to police, students, and parents. They decided to suspend all 24 students involved with the inappropriate dance for one day, and the students in the fight received a more severe consequence ranging from a few days suspension to recommendations for expulsion.

On Sunday morning, Harry received a call from the assistant superintendent saying, “We might have to cancel school on Monday. We have a threat that one of the kids that was in the fight is going to bring a gun and finish the job at school on Monday.” Harry rushed to the school to meet the district administrative team and the county police. They spent most of the afternoon attempting to break into Facebook pages to find the source of the threat. At about eight o’clock Sunday night they found the post. They found the original post and identified the three or four kids who were part of it. Harry described what happened next:

The police sent the SWAT team to this kids home. They searched the home, interviewed the parents, searched the cars, searched the lockers, interviewed the kid, and interviewed his friends. By about 10 o’clock at night they determine that it’s not a credible threat. We sent out an all call to all the parents, saying, “By now you’ve heard undoubtedly that there was a threat of a weapon coming to school. The police have determined that there’s nothing to it. We’re going to have school tomorrow morning.” About half the kids came on Monday morning. These two events are completely unrelated. Right across the street WCCO, KSTP, Channel 9, they’re all set up. They’re interviewing kids as they come to school.

At the start of school on Monday, the superintendent called Harry and said, “You have to go on the radio live in 10 minutes on KQRS. Tom Bernard wants to interview you at 8 am, live on KQRS.” Harry responded, “Do I have to?” She said, “Yes. You have to.” What Harry didn’t know was that every teacher and student in the school was listening to this interview live. The KQRS reporter was more interested in the senior boys’ dance than the fight, because the senior boys’ dance was on the 10 o’clock news the day before citing all the suspensions. The interviewer grilled Harry with questions like, why he felt it was necessary to suspend all of the students and how this will affect these students’ futures. Harry was then asked to interview with a variety of other news outlets throughout the day. Harry described the experience:

Later that day, I did interviews with KSTP, Channel 9; you name it. Channel 5 tricked me, which I was expected. They came in to do an interview on the fight and the gun, but halfway through switched to the senior boys' dance and the suspensions. The tricky part of this was the media, and many of the community got these two events connected, but they weren't connected at all. They were completely separate.

As Harry tried to get the media and community to settle down from these events, he came to school on Tuesday morning to find an extremely derogatory comment about him that had been spray painted on the school wall. In addition, the school scheduled to play Success High School in football Friday night called and requested the game be cancelled due to Harry's school being "unsafe and unruly." Harry handled these two situations with grace and convinced the opposing high school that his school and community were safe, and the football game needed to continue as scheduled. By the end of the week things had returned to normal, but Harry took some strategic steps along the way to ensure the situation was kept under control.

Harry explained the actions he took throughout the events to help the situation stay under control:

I did a lot of media, and I tried to use the media for my benefit. When I'm interviewed on KQRS, here's what I'm saying. "This is a great school. The kids are mad at me, because I just suspended the 24 most popular kids in the school." Instead of getting on the radio and saying, "These kids deserved it," I said, thanks to Don Drayer. "This is a great school. Last year we were ranked number four in Minnesota by the Washington Post for academic success. These are very talented, really good kids. All kids do dumb things. I have great kids. They do dumb things. I was a great kid. I can make a list of 10 dumb things that I did. These things just happen we'll work through it. Once we're done, we move on. We have short memories. We do our consequence. We forgive and forget, and away we go."

Harry believed "the messaging was really important not to separate people, but to bring people together." Harry mentioned he was always trying to pass the next referendum, whether he was a high school principal or a superintendent. Every one of his interactions with the community, every public event, every media event, he was thinking, "Two years from now we're going to

have a referendum. How do I sell our district?” Using an unfortunate student incident to publicize the positives of the school and district proved to be valuable in this situation.

In addition, many of the families of the students in the dance were not happy with the suspensions and were going to sue the district for unlawful suspension. Harry decided to find a win-win situation. Harry described what he decided to do:

I took one step back. Looked for a win-win. I told myself, “Stay in the relationship, and you’re going to come out way better.” I could have held to my guns, and done 24 suspensions, and been sued 12 times, and kept 12 kids from getting into top schools, spent \$200,000 of taxpayer money. Would that have been worth it, or am I a big enough person to say, “I got my way. You were out of school for a day.” I showed them that I am serious, but I didn’t ruin their lives either. I look human. I look like I listened. I still got what I needed to get out of it. I changed the coding from suspension to exclusion. The students would not need to claim they had been suspended on college applications, and I sent them a strong message that the behavior was inappropriate.

Another thing that Harry did was to maintain positive relationships with the students. He went to all their games and all of their concerts. He talked to all of the students in the hall, both groups of kids, the fight kids and the dance kids and worked hard to rebuild those relationships. Harry described what he was thinking when he strategically went out of his way to rebuild the relationships:

I could have stayed away from them, because they hated me. When I went through the hallway every morning wandering through the school, I heard the rumblings as I walked by, but I never gave up. I always went back the next day and asked them about their games, always came back the next day and asked them how they were doing. It took a month or two for us to rebuild our relationship with both groups of kids, but I did it. I could have easily said, “They hate me. They’ll graduate in a year. I’m just going to stay away from them,” but that would have been really dumb. They have little brothers and sisters. Their parents are all still here, both groups of kids.

Harry credits his upbringing for being able to manage this difficult situation. He claimed, “It was not the first time I was faced with a difficult challenge, which made the experience a little easier.”

Harry gained a lot of confidence from being exposed to this event and also learned a lot about himself as a leader. Harry mentioned one of his key takeaways from this event:

I think one of the things you learn through sports and through life is the leader gives credit to others when things go well, and takes the responsibility when things go wrong. You don't throw people under the bus. You don't blame, point fingers. That adaptive skill, I'll call it, is hugely important in any leadership role. If you want to move a whole organization from one place to the other, you can do it with a big hammer, and threats, and intimidation, but it's not going to last. As soon as you leave it's going to go away. To really lead you need to bring people along. You do it by being an example, doing the hard work yourself, being visible, keeping relationships, giving credit when things go well, taking the responsibility when things don't go well. Never badmouth anyone in public. If I have to talk to somebody about something they did wrong, I do it in private. Give them credit in public.

Harry believed that when you get challenged, you get an opportunity to demonstrate your leadership ability. Harry thought a challenge was an audition for the staff and for the community to see how you react under stress. Will you point fingers, and blame, and separate people, or are you going to bring people together, take responsibility, thank, support, coach, help people grow and get better? Harry mentioned the "real trick to all of this is to use a bad opportunity for good, and for the principal to audition their leadership qualities." The next story involves a principal who had to react quickly to ensure the safety of his entire school when a student had a loaded gun in his possession.

Loaded Gun on Student in Class Requires Quick Decisions

Nate was an assistant principal at Kettering High School when one morning a dean of students came into his office and said, "We have a student who is claiming there is a gun in the school." Nate said, "Are we sure?" The dean said, "Yup." He named who the source was and Nate said, "That's credible." Nate looked at the dean and said, "Well, why are you coming to me? Why aren't you going to the other [more tenured] assistant principal, or the lead?" He said, "A. the lead principal is not here and B. the person that supposedly has the gun you know very well." The student's father was a high profile public figure around the state and in the

community. Nate knew if they screwed this up it would be national news. Nate decided to immediately call their police liaison. The police liaison prepared his colleagues to go up to the 3rd floor and storm the student. Nate intervened and convinced the police to take a different approach. Nate described the conversation:

I said, "You can't do that. That will be on TV. You're going to be putting students at risk." The police Chief and the liaison were like, "Well, what do you think we should do?" I said, "Well, I've actually known this student since he was tiny." I said, "I can walk him down here, to the office." They're like, "We cannot have you do that." I said, "He will not know why I'm coming to get him." He'll just walk with me. They said, "Okay." So, I walked into the classroom, like normal and everybody's like, "Ooh." I said, "I need to see that guy, right there." He's like, "What I do?" I said, "Nothing, but I need to see you." He walked out into the hallway with me and we start walking. I saw him earlier that day come to school, and he was in his car and it looked like he had car problems or something. I said, "What's wrong with your car?" We're shooting the breeze all the way to my office. When we walk into my office, the police come from every angle and they slam him and do all kinds of stuff. We're sitting there and at this moment I felt like I betrayed him. The dean was sitting with me, the police ask him, "We heard you have a gun, do you?" He said, "Yes." They say, "Is it loaded?" He says, "Yes." They said, "Where?" His front pocket, so they pull it out and get ready to hand it to me, I'm like, "Come on now, this is not my expertise."

As soon as it was confirmed that the student had a gun, Nate called the student's father. The dad came directly to the school. Nate braced himself for a difficult conversation:

His dad comes through the door and I explained the situation to him. I said, "I apologize, I feel like I'm letting you and your son down." This man looks me dead in the face and said, "No, you have not. You have 1500 students in this building. Your job is to protect all 1500. You protected my son by having it go down right here. This could've got a lot uglier." I hadn't thought about it like that.

That afternoon the administrative team debriefed the situation and was happy with how the situation played out. As Nate was leaving the office and everyone else had already left, the lead principal pulled Nate back and said:

"Hey, one thing." I said, "Yeah." He goes, "Next time, you might want to let me know about it." I had not thought about that. When he said it I was like, "Oh" I got ready to say my fault, he goes, "No." He was laughing, but he was serious. I said, "Gotcha." He said, "You did everything you were supposed to do." He said, "So don't question yourself. Just don't forget to tell me next time."

Nate had acted as if he were the lead principal and forgot to inform his boss. What he learned from that was his principal was egoless. The lead principal could have been irate with Nate, but instead he praised him. Any place they went publicly the principal said, “I got a great assistant principal.” He let Nate speak to the district people. He said, “Nate, you are going to be a lead soon.” He never said publicly, “The idiot didn’t tell me about it.” He slapped Nate behind closed doors, but publicly he kept him intact. Nate claimed that was a huge teachable moment for him. Nate said, “He could have lit me up, but he taught me instead.” Since then, as Nate mentors others for leadership roles, he always thinks to himself, “Someday they could be me, how can I help prepare them for that moment.”

Nate explained his thought process as the event was unfolding:

I placed myself in that room, how would I respond if the police walked through that door. I instantly flipped to being a kid and panicking. I also flipped to being a guy of color and here come the police. The people that were talking about storming the room, weren’t people of color. There’s a different feel to that when police walk through the door, or pull me over in the car. So, I thought about that. I instantly thought about the safety of all the kids. If that went south, you’re on the 3rd floor. Out of 1500 students, 1000 of them are on those three floors, that’s showtime. The athletics played a part, minute to go in the game, you’re down two. Are you panicked or have you been there before? You act like you’ve been there before. Thinking things through has always been pretty decent for me, to not do a knee jerk reaction. Part of that, is the way I was raised also. In actuality, when I was in 10th or 11th grade, there was some talk about me being unflappable. I don’t know about the unflappable, on the outside it might have appeared that I was unflappable, but on the inside you’ve got things churning.

In addition, Nate used a lot of leadership skills to navigate the crucible successfully. Nate claimed the key leadership skills were:

Had to be kid savvy, not say a kid magnet, but the relationship piece; I had to have it. Or else there's no way I would've been able to take that kid out of class. There's no way. Would not have been able to remain calm with him. The relationship I had, all of a sudden we could just talk about different things that kept him mellow, or off track. The relationship with community, so his father who's, like I said, big time. I needed to have those community relationships established. A sense of calm, without a doubt, a sense of calm. Empathy. I thought about the impact on that kid's life, or what this was truly, truly going to be. I also remember thinking about the police and being able to change roles, or change perspectives. I had to understand and also to rely on their professionalism. I had to trust. I actually had to be able to listen, to understand why. I had to really listen so I could understand their perspective.

Nate recommended that if principals find themselves in a similar situation they should:

Remember this too shall pass. Some people always think, "Oh my god, this is the one. This decision." I can tell you, one week later, there will be something that will be monstrous, or could become major. I would also say to have humor, be able to laugh at yourself. To let people know that you're vulnerable, that you don't know everything. Make sure that you have your network, your confidants that you can call. They're not looking at it from anybody else's lens; they're looking at it from yours. Your survivability, they have your best interest at heart.

Nate faced a crucible that required him to act quickly. In our next story, the principal, Paul, found out what it was like when a parent refused to take "no" for an answer surrounding the Minnesota State High School Leagues ruling on the transfer policy.

Student Denied Access to Sport after a Transfer Violation

Paul was the lead principal of Triumph High School in a community known for its involved parents who fought for what they felt was right for their children. One day, his athletic director informed Paul that one of their students would not be eligible for an upcoming sport season because he lived outside the district. The student had recently open enrolled to Triumph, so he had two options: (1) he could retain full eligibility for varsity competition for one calendar year at his prior school after which time he would become fully eligible to participate at Triumph High School; or (2) he could compete in non-varsity level events at Triumph High School for one calendar year. When the athletic director told Paul about the options they decided to bring the family in for a meeting. Paul explained what happened during the meeting:

The parent was so angry with me, started calling me names and making it personal. He threatened to sue me and the district. I looked at him and said, "You can leave right now, because if this continues, it will no longer be civil. You need to leave, and when you're ready to have an adult conversation with me, you call me, but until then, there's no more conversation." Parent called me back in two days, and we met at a restaurant. "I'm not by myself with you anymore, so if you're going to act like a fool, you can do so in a public domain." We went out for breakfast at a restaurant and I said, "Okay, let's cut the crap. What do you want? Why do you want it? How can I help you get it? The Minnesota State High School League has said no. You can appeal the process, but chances are good you're not going to win. How can we help recover this moment for your child, and for you?"

The parent agreed with Paul, the situation had gotten way out of control and apologized; he wanted to salvage his family's reputation and try to come up with a good plan for his son. Paul suggested they go through the appeal process. He said, "Go through your appeal process. You don't know. You might win it. That's why it's called an appeal." That was what they determined to be plan A. Win the appeal and case closed. Plan B was, okay, you don't win the appeal, so what do we do with your student athlete? Plan B was to help the student save face and stay in the sport. They talked about the student playing JV for a year. They talked about what the JV opportunity looked like and what a JV schedule entailed. Paul really tried to encourage the parent not to let his student athlete walk away from the game. Paul felt that "if they walked away from it after losing, it looks like sour grapes." Paul suggested having the student be a captain on the JV team. The coach was onboard, the coach loved the kid, but they had to do it right. As it turns out, the kid didn't win the appeal. They had him play JV for a year, and then he was able to get into varsity competition the following year.

Paul digressed on the situation and said, "It's just helping people manage the moment." At the time Paul was heated during the first meeting with the parent. Paul described what he was thinking:

What are we really talking about? What's the issue? The issue isn't me. The issue isn't I've done something wrong. The issue is your son or your daughter. Let's get back to what the real issue is. I have these policies that I'm going to uphold because they're right. We're not going to cheat. Once that is out there, let's talk about it. Let's define the real issue. The real issue is, you're living in the wrong part of town or the wrong district. How can we help you and your son or daughter get through this and then navigate the back side of it? The issue isn't me. The issue isn't the high school. The issue is you and where you're living right now, so let's get the cards on the table and call it what it is, and let's find a way to help.

Paul acknowledged that he was not going to allow the parent to treat him with disrespect. He did everything in his power to help the family, but found it difficult to rationalize with people who were so emotionally invested in the decision. Paul said, "If parents or students are discontent, we'll help them get through that, but you don't have to get beat up in the process." Paul described his key takeaway learning from this crucible event:

The greatest lesson for me in my career has been this: We are working with and dealing with your most precious prize. That most precious prize is a person's child. If you have children, and I have children, I want the best for them. I'm not afraid to fight for it. Once you get through the weeds of that, the question is, how do we get on the same page? How do we work in the same direction ethically, on what we can do for your son or daughter? We're not going to violate any policies. We're not going to be unethical in working with these situations.

Paul felt like his upbringing from the South and his experience as a high school principal enabled him to stand his ground with this demanding and threatening parent. He stuck to his guns and remained ethical throughout the experience. By staying as calm as he could and working with the facts, they were able to come to a manageable solution for the student athlete and state high school league. In the next story, Chris dealt with an unruly parent upset about his son getting cut from the hockey team.

Out of Control Parent during High School Hockey Cuts

Chris was in his first year at Midwestern High School. As students and staff prepared to head into the long Thanksgiving weekend, Chris received a phone call from an angry parent.

This parent was on the interview committee that selected Chris a few months prior for the principal position. The parent was involved in the community and was upset that his son was cut from the high school hockey team. Chris listened for fifteen minutes as the parent made accusations against one of the hockey coaches, who was also the school resource officer. Chris explained the context of the phone call:

He lost his freaking mind. I was dealing with crazy emails and phone calls on Thanksgiving Day, threatening lawyers and making false accusations about one of our assistant coaches, also our school resource officer. He was making accusations that the resource officer met with his son privately with his Taser attached to his hip and told him he wasn't going to make the team and escorted him out and that his son felt threatened by all of this. It was just insane.

As a first year principal, Chris felt bad because the parent was a part of his interview team and he did not want him to be upset. Chris wanted him to at least feel validated about the claim, so he investigated the situation. Chris called the superintendent for advice because the superintendent knew the parent well. He sought to understand where the parent was coming from by listening to the parent and holding a number of meetings to gather all of the information. Chris pulled video from where the student athlete was cut in a public place; there was camera footage of the entire interaction. In fact, Chris still had that CD because he claimed, "I never know when it's going to come back around." Chris interviewed coaches and players to make sure he had the story correct before making a decision. Chris called the elementary principal the middle school principal where this kid had gone to school and tried to get some information about the parent. Chris asked questions like, "How do you work best with him? Have you had any luck with the mom? Is she better to work with on things? Can she help us with this situation?" In addition, Chris did some research on the web about this parent and found out this individual had ruined a Miss America contestant's chances by making accusations to the selection committee; the story was all over the paper about a year earlier. Once he started to find out some of this information, it

helped Chris realize this was just the way the man operated. Chris saved all of the voice mails and emails because he wanted to keep things documented in case lawyers got involved. Chris explained what he was thinking throughout the few weeks that this incident occurred:

People like that like to hide behind a computer screen and carbon copy the Pope and President of the United States, the superintendent, the board of education and everyone because they think it's going to do something. It's maddening because it takes so much time and takes so much time away from the purpose of why we're in education. He was making accusations and then he wanted to negotiate. I knew all along that it was a bunch of garbage and, of course, people don't have a right to play sports. It's a privilege. You can sue all you want, but in the end it comes down to the coach cut your son, he didn't make the team and we get to make that decision. The kid didn't want any part of this. He just flat out didn't want any part of this. It was his dad that was out of his mind.

Chris claimed that he has learned a lot from this experience. First, he learned that this situation should have been directed to the athletic director and Chris should have let him handle it. By getting involved, Chris made the situation grow bigger than it needed to be. Chris explained the analogy he uses with parents now if a situation like this occurs:

If you have a problem with your foot, you don't go to your general practitioner. You go to somebody who deals with feet. I don't do the athletic schedule. I don't hire the athletic coaches. I don't do any of that kind of stuff. I don't know the state high school league policies. We've got a person for that and his name is Blank and he's across the hall over there. I shouldn't be handling any of this stuff. It's not mine. For that reason, maybe I was in a bad spot because I was trying to be helpful and at that point as a first year principal, what I didn't understand is the more I tried to help, the worse probably things were.

Another thing Chris learned was he can deflate or put out fires pretty quickly by following a five-step process. The steps include listening, empathizing, apologizing, asking questions, and then solving the problem. Chris claimed that, "Really, no matter how angry somebody is when they call me, if I follow these five steps, I can pretty much have them in the palm of my hand by the time that we're done with the call; or at least they feel validated." Chris thought if he had handled the problem in this way, instead of making it a huge deal, it might have been less of a stressful experience.

Chris had some advice for young or new administrators who will most likely experience an out of control parent at some point in their career:

I would tell all young administrators don't ever answer your phone. If it's a number from outside the building and you don't know who it is, let it go to voice mail. Voice mail always gives you the opportunity to get homework done, to return a phone call in a timely manner, to gather facts and to get some perspective about the parent or the situation that's going on. We live in a society that requires immediate response to everything and I think the more we do that, the more foolish we are. I'm not saying you wait four days to take care of it, but let it go to your voice mail, gather some information, return the call. What's going to happen is that person, if they got through to you and they're upset, they're torqued about something and they're just going to scream at you. You're set on your heels already. You're behind. Not that you need to win, but at least you need to have some sort of reasonable response. It just gives you some time.

Chris admitted that he is a "people pleaser" and if something doesn't feel good for all parties involved, he doesn't feel good about the situation. He admitted that he is still working on "understanding I'm not going to make everyone happy; the longer I engage in dialogue like this with parents, the more work I'm making for myself." In addition, by letting the people who work under him (athletic director, assistant principals, deans, teachers or whoever) do their jobs and handle situations on their own, allows individuals to feel empowered and, therefore, creates a stronger more capable team.

Chris claimed he had many stories similar to this one, where out of control parents consumed a ton of his time, when his focus should have been on student achievement and helping staff improve their practice. The next story involves Tyler and his experience with managing an older school culture as a brand new school opened in his district.

School Climate Forces Principal into Action

Tyler was the principal at Honest High School the year a brand new high school was built in his district. The new high school had all of the bells and whistles and had the opportunity to hire all new staff. Many of the affluent families in the community got to send their students to

this new school because the boundaries needed to be adjusted to accommodate all of the new houses that were being built in the area. Some of Tyler's teachers inevitably left his school to take jobs at the new school and some of his teachers were angry they didn't get the chance to work at the "new and perceived better" high school. Tyler knew that having many new staff members and students could potentially have a large effect on his schools culture, so he spent a year and a half before the changes were made with a steering team preparing for their new beginning.

Tyler explained his experience once the school year started:

We worked very hard and really all of us felt quite confident that we would be where we needed to be, and then we showed up in September and two weeks later, we weren't where we thought we were. We really paid great attention to culture. We paid great attention to climate. We were always great at the details, and we were working really hard on getting the story out front and getting the symbolism out in front and really cherishing those pieces. What happened was not so much the culture issue, it was certainly a climactic issue that unfolded because of the new mix of people at the school. It was a couple dozen young kids who were acting in really outlandish fashion, not only in our school, but also the community. It had really built during the summer, unbeknownst to us in the school. It was a neighborhood thing that manifested itself into all of the schools in the district with the new mixes of students. People were fighting for their turfs, so to speak, either literally or figuratively. The students and staff had never seen behaviors like this, so they became disempowered very quickly.

Tyler and his administrative team tried to stay in front of the problem by following the student handbook, issuing quick and effective punishments when disciplinary actions were needed. The problem was the other 2,200 students and staff did not know that the problems were being addressed and solved. People in the school and community started to talk and a negative image was being painted about Honest High School. It became clear to the administration that they did not have a problem with fourteen kids; they had a problem with 2,200 kids being disempowered. The students did not feel like they belonged in the school or had a voice in the school. Tyler and his team were paying attention to ends and the ways. The problem was they

were losing the people, and that was the means. They flipped the script, and started paying attention to the means. They literally looked 2,200 students and teachers in the eye and said, “Here’s what I stand for. What do you stand for? How are we going to treat each other on this messy, nonlinear journey?” Tyler expressed his thoughts as the situation unfolded:

When you lose your guiding coalition of students, when your guiding coalition goes underground, your middle 60 sits deeper on the fence and all it does is it creates a void that is just a black hole. We had to address that immediately. It was time for the principal to look every student in the eye in a small group and ask them what they stand for, what they’re willing to stand for. I asked the students to look to their left, look your right, how many people here are causing trouble? Not many people here want this kind of school. Now, the question is what are you going to do about it? The answer is real simple. You’re either part of the solution or you’re part of the problem. There is no fence.

Tyler made it very clear to all of the students and staff that he would be in the hallways, classrooms, and throughout the school reiterating his message of “you’re either a part of the problem or a part of the solution.” Tyler challenged students to take back their school and turn it into a school they were proud to be a part of. Tyler explained how the school began to look, feel, and be better:

It wasn’t what I did, it was what the kids did and all I did was be there to catch the kids doing it right. I wasn’t in the hallways when the kids were diving for the trenches. I was in the hallway to catch the perpetrators, I was working with the perpetrators, I was solving the problems on that end. What I did was fill a void. The void needed to be my presence. The void needed to be my voice, the void needed to be my consistency. I was the symbol of the message, whether they heard me, whether they saw me wasn’t the key. It’s could they feel me and could they smell me? If you can feel me and you can smell me that means I’m leading. You don’t lead by being heard. You don’t lead by being seen, you lead by stinking up the joint and you lead by being felt.

Tyler took every sheet of paper down off the walls throughout the school and put up six posters about five feet long by three feet high with one word, it was the word *respect*. There was only one word on the walls in the school. That was it. It was respect. Tyler changed his daily routines. He was in the hallways and classrooms constantly. He looked students and staff in the

eye every single day and asked them what they stand for. He got to know students by name; he wanted to know what was going well for them and how he could improve the school. Whether they saw Tyler in the hallways or not, the hallways were reverberating with his presence; they heard him the week before; they heard him two weeks before. He passed out business cards to students and staff that became the schools battle cry, "Respect, it starts with me." Management of self and the purpose of, "It starts with me" the consistency of that message was big. Tyler explained how students reacted:

Oh my god, he's going to say it again. Here he comes again. Doesn't this guy ever go away? Doesn't the story ever go away? No, I'm omnipresent. I am your best friend or I am your worst enemy and there is no in between.

He was loud, he was clear, he was consistent and now it was their turn. Tyler claimed "the students were gems, they were absolute gems, they just took their school back and they made it better than it was two weeks earlier. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." The staff rebuilt that school one kid at a time and it took them about two weeks to do it. The rest was history.

That was the year that Tyler never went back to the old job description of a principal. He always had great discipline every year, always picking up french fries in the lunchroom, always doing parking lot duty, doing the duty that involved the greatest challenges with kids. They knew him, he knew them and everything else paled in comparison to that. Tyler thought the key was getting out of his office, "Forget all the job description crap and do what you've always done well, and that's connecting with the kids." Tyler explained what he learned from this experience:

You learn to speak the truth. You learn to speak it face-to-face and I also understood that our biggest enemy is the middle. Our biggest enemy is when people choose to sit on the fence and do nothing, and if I'm going to get them off the fence, the home room is not going to do it. I'm going to have to challenge them to their face. I'm going to have to help them see that the person to their right feels this way, the person to their left feels this way; it's time for them to commit. I had to help them understand that the problem isn't as big as you think it is.

What it did is it helped Tyler understand the importance of self. It helped him understand that what he stood for was important; it was not whether the students agreed; it was whether they understood and hopefully respected it. The greatest hope was that the students followed and led themselves. They were not going to become a part of that story until he became the story. It started with him.

The next section of this chapter includes stories related to change initiatives. Multiple participants described nine crucible experiences involving either (1) structural implementation changes and/or (2) attempting to change staff mindsets. I will begin with the stories on structural implementations.

Section Two: Implementing Change

Implementing the Block Schedule

Kyle was a young high school principal who thought he knew everything. He worked closely with the superintendent to discuss instructional changes that could have a positive impact on student achievement. Kyle did not have an administrative team because the school was so small; so, it was up to him and the superintendent to drive instructional changes. The students of the high school expressed interest in expanding the course offerings, but Kyle and the superintendent knew they didn't have the funds to increase staffing. They began looking at a 4 x 4 block schedule, which was different from the traditional six period day in place at the school.

The high school was located in a small, traditional, union-focused town that was comfortable operating the same way it always had.

Kyle and the superintendent started to lay the foundation for exploring the block schedule. They held regular meetings with their teacher leadership team and discussed a variety of topics. Kyle explained the questions they tried to address:

We asked questions to our site leadership team like, what's out there? What are other schools doing? How can we explore the options? What are the potential benefits and pitfalls? We listed all of the issues that we thought would come into play. What decisions would be decided by the leadership committee? What would be decided at my desk as the principal? What would be decided at the superintendent and school board level? What would be the timelines that we're looking at? We knew we couldn't go to a seven period day, financially. We couldn't afford it. By having those meetings it helped guide us through the process. The key questions became, how do we get more curricular offerings? How do we get kids eight classes versus six in the school day? How can we do that but yet still provide the necessary curriculum?

Over two years the team explored options. Kyle recalled trying to get all of the staff out to actually see how a building operated on a 4 x 4 block schedule, allowing the staff to be immersed in the building's operation. Starting at five a.m. from his school, he drove each group of staff members to the metro to tour a few schools with the block schedule and then headed back to his district. Throughout the visits they discussed the pros and cons of the schedule.

At some point in the second year of exploration they knew they needed to present the idea to the staff and school board for a vote. They could no longer explore the block schedule for a third year; it was time to move forward. Kyle and the staff, advocating for the change, knew they only had one chance to vote. They threw their markers out to the different staff members; "Where are you at with this? What else can we take care of and answer?" The building consisted of approximately 35 staff members; so, they were able to get the pulse of the staff pretty quickly. They decided if they could get around 70% supporting the change, they would say, "Now we're going to vote, and every person's going to have an opportunity to be

heard.” The school board started to get wind of this initiative and didn’t like not being consulted. The increased conversations with staff members started spurring the school board members loyal to specific teachers to vote no. It took a concerted effort by the superintendent, Kyle, and other teacher leaders in the building to finally feel comfortable they would get 70% yes vote from staff and be approved by the school board.

They only voted once, and the vote passed with a little over 70 % of staff voting yes. It was a tremendous shift for students, staff, community members, and school board members to go from a six period day, to now a four period day with a switch every other day. They operated for almost three years on a block schedule. Then a few new seats on the school board shifted and decided that it was time to get rid of “Kyle’s plan.” Kyle claimed, “It never was my plan; it was always about the kids and about the programming. This was not new to the state of Minnesota, it was not new to the educational world, it was just new to the community; it was new to the school district”.

After numerous school board meetings and much public scrutiny of Kyle, the school board decided that they were going to eliminate the block schedule. That prompted the student body to do a walkout in January. With the exception of the student athletes, who were in a winter sport, all the students walked out of the building at a pre-planned time. News media arrived. The students had countless contact with the media prior to that, signifying they wanted the block schedule to stay in place. The walk-out prompted huge school board meeting attendance. School board meetings had to take place in the library or in the band hall because they were the largest facilities. Kyle needed to have the support of the teachers, but some of them did not want to put their necks on the line. Ultimately, Kyle had to stand with the superintendent and defend their educational process by themselves. Kyle remembered a board

member pointing his finger at him and saying, “This is the worst thing that’s ever happened to our kids, and how dare you?” Kyle noted when he was at board meetings, he politely bit his tongue, and used civil words. Then after the meeting, or in a subsequent meeting with the superintendent and board members, he had the heart to heart conversation asking, “Why are you doing this? Why are you publicly bashing me at meetings and to the media?”

It was a contentious time, because it pitted the administration against the school board, and put the kids in the middle. Kyle stated, “Some of the staff members did not like the 90 minute period of time, because if they were bad teachers in 52 minutes, they were going to be an even worse teachers in a 90 minute period of time.” The administration argued that the students wanted to maintain the block schedule and it was a cost effective way to having more course offerings; while the school board argued it was not good practice and the class periods were too long. Kyle explained the outcome:

I think it came back to where the negative teachers over-verbalized, overpowered the positive teachers. I started hearing the rumbling of, “We’re looking to change it.” Then I had to go back and ask my allies to start telling a positive story. They did for a period of time to allow it to progress for another year, but for whatever reason, it didn’t sustain itself. The school board voted to reverse the decision and move back to a six period day schedule.

The difficult part for Kyle and his family were the personal attacks coming from the community as this discussion took place. Kyle had a daughter, a junior in the high school at the time, who opted to enroll full time at a post-secondary institution to avoid the attacks in the hallways and at extracurricular activities from students, teachers, and families. Kyle’s wife felt like she was walking on eggshells everywhere she went because people looked and pointed at her. In the end, Kyle and his family decided to look for principal positions in another district because it was just not worth it. He stayed at the high school for one more year to see to it that things returned to normal, but decided to take a principal job closer to the metro.

Through the experience Kyle learned that even though you might think that you have something resolved on the front end, like he did when he got 70% of the vote, that people's true colors come out throughout the implementation phases. Kyle mentioned, "Some people will stand by you and some will let the pack eat you alive." Kyle described his ultimate takeaways:

You have to be honest, and you have to be up front. If you don't know something, you inform people of that and work together to find the answers. Then you need to start identifying some of the positive attributes of the change you implemented and make those well known to the district and community. You need to be present at board meetings to quell or diminish any types of rumblings or problems that arise and you need the student voice to be heard. If people are being unethical, you stand by your morals, feel good about who you are and what you stand for regardless of the outcome. And last but not least, in education things come and they go. Even if you don't win the first battle, ultimately it will come back again and you can build on it. You have to be strategic on when to push things through and when to let the tide pass for another day. Don't ever completely shoot yourself in the foot, if at all possible.

Kyle continued to push forward and thought about the positives for the next year and a half before he accepted his next principal job in a larger metro district, but this experience prepared him for future opportunities. The next story on implementing change revolves around a principal who changed the way a teacher-run school ran leadership team meetings, a change heavily resisted by the staff.

Implementing a New Teacher Leadership Team

Betty was a relatively new principal at Intelligence High School when the superintendent told her they were no longer going to fund department chairs who were paid to deal with how many pencils to order, how many books the department had, who was doing the inventory, and who was going to speak up at the staff meetings. The superintendent wanted Betty to reallocate those funds to an instructional leadership team model focusing on the overall well-being of the school and student achievement. Staff selected for the team still handled communication to their departments and managerial work, but they were also tasked with creating instructional and achievement goals, and monitoring them throughout the year. The first obstacle Betty faced in

instituting this change was handling many long standing department chairs, never previously voted into the position, who now wanted to automatically be allowed to join the Instructional Leadership Team. Betty thought it was more advantageous to have each department vote for whom they wanted representing their department, selecting someone who could add instructional expertise to the team. Many of the former department chairs were not selected by their peers, which made them angry and bitter. Betty was pleased with her department's selections, but knew culturally it would take time for the former chairs who felt like they got burned to feel respected and valued again. Betty explained a particular situation she felt was pivotal in getting the committee off on the right step:

The superintendent didn't put any rules in place about how people were going to get picked for the Instructional Leadership Team. I immediately had a guy who was a blowhard, who came in and said, "I heard that they negotiated that position, and I would like to do that. I'm going to sign up for that." I knew I didn't want him in the group, and that if he was he would drown everyone else out. No one had told me what we were supposed to do, but I took it upon myself to say, "You know, that's not the way we're going to do this. I'm going to tell people about the jobs. People who are interested can submit their names to the school secretary. She will then put information out to each department, and departments will vote on who's going to do the job for that department." I said, "I would ask that you not go back and tell everybody that you want this job, because then there might be others in your department who want it too who won't step up. They'll be quiet then." I don't know if he listened to me or not, but I nudged a couple other people and said, "Think about this. Jump in if you want to. We're going to have departments vote."

Once the Instructional Leadership Team was established, Betty had to provide the team with a clear direction for their purpose. At the beginning, most of the teachers wanted to focus their attention and time on operational ideas like "how do we get the students to stop swearing in the hallways or attendance issues." It was not until Betty and a few of her colleagues went to a conference by Richard and Rebecca DuFour on Professional Learning Communities that she realized she needed to get her team to discuss common assessments and how they can evaluate their own progress in their classrooms. Betty introduced the idea of collaborative team meetings

to her Instructional Leadership Team and people immediately got nervous. Many of the teachers were scared of comparing themselves to other teachers and were hesitate to buy in. Betty decided to bring a consultant in to speak to her staff, but a few teachers tried to derail the meeting:

One of the guys in that meeting said, “I don’t have time for this.” I said, “Well, how do you not have time for this? We’re talking about you and your colleagues identifying the outcomes that kids have to meet. You designing the assessment to know whether they got there or not, and then you’re looking at the results of that to see how everybody did. That’s your job. How would you not have time to do that?” I had been there long enough by then to say something like that and not have people throw things at me.

Another staff person chimed in and said, “How can we afford this?” Betty responded by saying, “We will make it work and I promise it won’t come out of your budget.” One by one staff members started to listen more intently to Betty and a few of the teacher leaders who were spearheading this charge. At times Betty asked exceptional teachers or teams to share their progress with the staff on discussing common assessments and effective teaching practices. As departments started to see the results in student test scores, they, too, wanted to see that success and started to engage in meaningful conversations. Betty recalled a particular experience when a master teacher shared his results with the staff:

The Science department did a unit assessment, and they all sat down and talked about it. Then their instructional leader came to the meeting with charts and said, “Look what we found out.” He said, “We looked at question seventeen. Everybody’s kids screwed that one up,” and they looked at it and said, “What’s wrong with this question? What didn’t we cover? They found out the question was very poorly written. Somebody else said, “Why did your kids do so much better in this strand,” which was environmental science, “than my kids?” That was his passion. He spent more time covering it, and taught it differently. It just started spreading across all the departments; scores were rapidly improving and no one wanted to be left behind.

Betty claimed she made many strategic moves that allowed her teams to be successful. First, she gave the staff time to work through the kinks and buy into the vision. She provided a clear roadmap and met departments where they were at. She started with the end in mind, so

departments had a clear idea of where they were going with their conversations and discussions. She modeled good instructional decisions by having teachers share with the staff their progress and she allowed time for processing. The full implementation on the Instructional Leadership Team and collaborative teams took multiple years until it was operating effectively. Betty continued to push teams lagging behind by having one-on-one conversations and probing them for progress. Second, Betty had eyes and ears in the teaching staff that let her know when certain departments were not engaging in the collaborative practices and then she would “turn up the heat a little bit.” She asked them open-ended questions about their progress to get to the bottom of the problem and provided them solutions if they could not come to a resolution. Betty created a culture of “we” and not “me.” She did not let her ego get in the way of student success and continued to ask reflective questions of her staff to get them moving in the right direction.

Betty claimed she learned how to “see around corners and play chess” during this time. She believed she learned to be much better at planning and being strategic throughout this experience. Betty felt like the crucible of this experience was never extremely traumatic, but always consistent throughout a four to five year period of time. The result revolutionized how her staff did business, and she knew this was her greatest challenge as a principal. To keep the train on the tracks took constant maintenance and attention. Another story shared about implementing change was Paul’s experience of getting a staff to embrace new teaching strategies and course offerings.

Changing Instructional Strategies and Course Offerings

Paul was in his second lead principal position in a traditional outer ring suburban district. One year he was reviewing the Advanced Placement (AP) results at his school and thought “it was embarrassing.” He saw the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) results and

“knew we could do better.” He began to think of ways that he could implement a change that allowed his students and staff to “do better and be better.” The high school had worked well for the community and they were comfortable with where they were at, but it was not a college prep or a college driven high school. They ran AP courses, yet few students opted for them, and those that did performed poorly. Paul decided he wanted to change that and challenged himself to bring the school and district up to a different level of performance. Paul explained the initial process of implementation:

Ultimately, changing from AP courses to all College in the Schools (CIS) courses meant opportunities for students. It meant free college education, it meant free college credits, and it meant putting our high school in a position and place that it had never been before. I think anytime you go into that change model, people always resort back to a deficit model. “I can’t do this, I don’t have the skills to do this. I really don’t want to learn anything else new around this.” We really spent some time trying to help the staff understand the purpose of why, and then once that vision was cast, we created and painted a very clear picture of what that vision would be as we began the steps of change.

Paul and his team began to cast the vision by talking with stakeholder groups of students, staff, and community members. They asked some key questions: “Do you feel like you’re getting the right education at this high school? How could it be better? If it could be better, what would it look like? Would you like to have different opportunities than you currently have?” The most telling point for Paul was when he talked to the business owners in the community. He asked the business owners: “What skills would you like to see your future employees possess as they enter into the workforce?” He put all of the information he gathered from stakeholders into a package, and called it ...*The Way*.

Throughout the spring Paul reiterated to his staff: “We can be better as a school for our students and our community. This is The Way.” He and the team continued their work, and in April, they had a huge community meeting, but only three parents showed up. Paul thought, “What the heck?” His staff felt a little downtrodden, because they didn’t think there was interest

in students taking CIS courses. The school leadership team met and decided, “We’re not giving up because parents didn’t show up, and we’re going to keep moving forward. So, they went into the fall and launched the new course offerings. There was not a lot of traction until the second year of implementation when things really started catching on. All of a sudden, they had another meeting in the spring for parents, and they had an auditorium full of parents that showed up and asked, “What are these college-in-the-school courses? Does it cost me anything?” The school was able to provide CIS courses at no cost for parents. This removed all of the barriers and roadblocks that people might use, such as, “I can’t afford it. I’m not prepared to take it. Why can’t we keep it the way it used to be?” The teaching staff continued the implementation process, and in year five, Paul’s last year at the school, the Daggett Organization recognized Paul’s school as a national model school. In addition, they were recognized by the governor as a blueprint high school, as a blue ribbon and national school of excellence. Paul believed, “We received all of these accolades because we were able to not only cast a vision, but hold true to that vision from start to finish.”

Paul explained his biggest challenge of this crucible:

We would have staff that would stand up and say, “I can’t believe you’re making us do this. Why are we doing this? We’re a good high school the way we are.” Parents, “I graduated from this high school and it was good enough for me, so it’s good enough for my kids.” People became so deeply rooted in the known, that they were afraid to look at the unknown, even if the unknown was better, even if the unknown engaged and involved very few risks, they were still afraid to leave the certainty of that moment that they have in time that seemed to work for them.

Paul learned about persistence throughout this experience. He learned to listen and engage all stakeholders in the process. By gaining buy-in from the stakeholders Paul was able to lean on them for support throughout the process. Paul expressed the importance of trust through this experience:

It's all about developing relationships, and for me, anytime I go into a school, the first group of people that I work to build trust with, ironically, are students. I spend so much time with students. I want them to know who their principal is. I want them to know who I am, what I stand for, and what they can expect out of me. Then after I work with them, then it's staff. It's just a matter of being able to press the pause button, and doing the right things in the right way, to get the right results. If you misstep with kids, or if you misstep with parents or if your misstep with staff, it's hard to overcome. Trust is violated, and at the end of the day, if you don't have trust, you have nothing.

Paul's experience proved to be a positive one, but implementing change was the challenging part. Our next participant, Grant, expressed his most difficult challenge as a lead principal as being the time he implemented Professional Learning Communities at his school.

Implementing Professional Learning Communities

Grant was a relatively new high school principal who had just finished his dissertation research on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). He wanted to implement this new idea with his instructional staff, but knew there would be roadblocks along the way. He prepared by reading as much research on professional learning communities as he could get his hands on, he attended the PLC Summit Conference for two years in the summer, visited schools that had already implemented PLCs, and organized building level committees to create a streamlined five year implementation plan. Grant explained what he felt was the most important first step of the process:

As a principal or a leader, you have to have more knowledge than anybody in the state about that topic. You have to spend the time learning and training yourself. Then, before you bring it to your staff, your leadership team needs to have more knowledge than anybody else because if they don't, when people ask questions and we can't answer even the theory side of it, much less the practical classroom side of it, they're going to have a hard time buying in.

After Grant and his team felt they had a detailed and clear five-year plan they rolled it out to the staff. At the time, Grant did not expect there to be much push back because he thought everyone would be excited about the opportunity to collaborate and improve together; however,

he found many teachers were not excited and downright angry about the process. One particular teacher stood up during the staff meeting and tried to derail the implementation process before it even started. He said, “This is just another fad, it will be gone soon and I’m not doing it.” Grant had to think on his feet and provide the staff with statistics about how professional learning communities have proven results and that it was not going to be a fad.

After the rocky first staff meeting, Grant asked to speak to the teacher who tried to railroad him. He told the teacher that he had been inappropriate and expected him to behave at the staff meetings. The teacher told the principal how he felt about the change and Grant began to realize this was not going to be an easy change initiative. Grant recognized some of the other staff members might be feeling the same way as this boisterous teacher so, his administrative team read Anthony Muhammed book *Transforming School Cultures* and broke people down into three categories: believers, tweeners, and fundamentalists. Grant explained the process his team took to categorize his staff:

I had gone into a building that spent over \$10,000 the year before bringing in a group to try to help teach a department how to get along. You can get a sense for what the culture was like. It was not a good culture. We broke people into categories of believers, tweeners, and fundamentalists. Anthony Muhammad had four categories, but we looked at those three. Once we categorized the staff we realized we had a lot of fundamentalists, people who believed they were content experts and didn’t want to change. The goal for us was always to move fundamentalist to tweeners and to try to move tweeners to believers. Ultimately, we used our believers to get the tweeners and fundamentalists to buy-in. Some of the tweeners bought in because they saw administration supporting staff. Others moved just because they respected their colleagues so much. Inevitably some of the fundamentalist never moved and that went down a whole different process of performance improvement plans.

Grant began to meet with the leader of the fundamentalist teachers before every staff meeting to flush out any questions the teacher had before bringing it to staff. This proved to be a valuable move because he now had the loudest and biggest naysayer in his corner. When other staff members complained or had questions at staff meetings, this teacher stood up and shot them

down. Grant started to notice a change in mindset from teachers and it had a lot to do with this particular teacher, well respected by his colleagues, buying into the process. Throughout the five-year plan, there were many hiccups: lack of teacher training in how to write summative assessments and how to talk about data, communication issues amongst department members, and disagreements with grading practices. However, Grant felt the process had come a long way since they implemented PLCs, and realized that it was a necessary progression to get his staff to where they needed to be.

Grant learned a lot through this experience because it carried on for five years and he faced pushback from his staff throughout the entire experience. Grant explained his first key learning from this experience:

It doesn't have to be about you. Sometimes, I think principals think it always has to be about them, where leadership can be shown by the fact that you take staff members who are doing great things and let them share with their colleagues. That's leadership; it doesn't have to be about you.

In addition, Grant learned how to be a reflective thinker and how to let people see that he was being reflective with their questions, concerns, and comments. Grant learned to have individual conversations and not shy away from them, making sure people were comfortable to come to him and share their opinions. He felt that if people did not feel comfortable with him then he would lose them; they would quit following his vision. Grant changed the structure of his staff meetings to put the teachers in front to showcase their hard work and increase buy-in. Grant also learned, "You don't need to have all the answers right away. It's ok to tell people you will get back to them, but you just have to follow through in a timely manner." Grant's experience dragged out over five years, but our next participant, Chris had a more sudden crucible with implementing a No Substitute procedure at his high school.

Instituting a “No Substitutes” Procedure

Chris was an experienced high school principal who had served as the lead principal in multiple buildings. He always liked to push against the status quo, which he felt was good for staff and students, but at times was difficult for parents to understand. Chris explained why he felt this is a challenge for leaders in education:

I think embracing change in education is a challenge. I had a great experience in education and it went like this so when my kid is in school it should be exactly like that for them as well. They should learn math the same way that I learned math because I did well with it. They should think about science in the same way that I did. They should read the same books that I did. We wouldn't do that in any other career where we would suggest staying the same. When we change things, parents lose their minds. I found that the best way to get around that is to take the conversation out of education and put it in the workplace. Frame the situation so people can understand it from their perspective.

Chris's crucible started with an idea from a staff member. In Chris's school they have 30-minute dialogues about six times a year during teacher prep time. The meetings all have topics and this particular meeting the topic was “What are the things that we're tired of in education?” They pretended there were no rules. They could do whatever they wanted and they started all of the statements with “what if.” One teacher said, “What if there were no substitutes?” Another teacher said, “What if we provided more opportunities for students to collaborate?” Over the course of the meeting many people chimed in to add their opinion and by the end of the meeting the idea was formed for Chris to look into the “no sub idea”.

Chris began to do a lot of research and reading on innovative ideas and tried to see if any other schools had ever tried the idea of no substitute teachers. At the time, the school was going to a one-to-one initiative that supplied every student their own personal Chromebook, so Chris knew a few computer labs in the building would become obsolete. This allowed additional space in the building to be transformed into flexible learning spaces. Chris crunched the numbers and figured he needed about \$100,000 to get the computer labs transformed to flexible learning

environments and he found out they spent about \$100,000 a year on subs. Over the summer the administrative team transformed the labs to look like college campus collaborative labs with soft-sided chairs, couches and booths. People in the community made comments like, “What are you doing for these kids; they’re being coddled.” Chris explained in great detail the WHY of this initiative:

Kids don’t fail in college because they don’t know the academics. They get into college because they’ve proven the academic part because they took the ACT. The college says we’ll let you in because you know enough. They fail in college because they don’t know how to use their time wisely. They’ve never had flexibility during their day. They had seven classes when they were in high school, or eight, and now they’ve only got four. Now they’ve got all kinds of free time. I’m trying to replicate what life is going to be like when they get to college.

When Chris rolled out the plan for no subs at the beginning of the school year, he communicated to the parents how it was going to happen. Chris had a few parents who lost their minds about it. Chris explained how he responded to angry parents:

It’s like well, what do you do for a living? Well, I work in a bank. When you’re gone, do you get somebody else to come in and do your work? No. If they did, would it be as effective? No. Why is it okay in education then? Well, you need to supervise my kids. No, we supervise people in prisons. What are they going to do? It’s going to be chaos in there. Kids are responsible for their own behavior and the last time I checked in the state of Minnesota, we give kids the opportunity to drive and be in charge of one of the most dangerous things that we could in a vehicle. Nobody seems concerned about that. Everyone celebrates it. Last I checked in Minnesota, you can be 12 and get certified to shoot a weapon. I don’t know, leaving the kid unsupervised for 45 minutes to work on their own to do something productive, I’ll take my chances.

Chris talked with all the students on the first day of school in the auditorium and explained the process when a teacher needed to be gone. As well, Chris explained how they got staff on board:

I didn’t tell staff that they couldn’t get subs, but I said to them if there’s no valid educational reason why you need a sub, I don’t want you to get them because it’s a waste of \$150 that we could use in a way that better benefits kids and staff. I didn’t have many people press me on it because I told them if you’ve got kids in there watching a movie while you’re gone that they could watch on their Chromebook or their device, I’m going to be really upset. If you need somebody to proctor a test, get a sub. You don’t need to ask me for permission. I’m telling you guys, you’re professionals; if this is what you need, get a sub.

The first couple of months the administration team had to really be on top of the fact that they designated spaces for specific things. They said, “This place is the studio. The studio is a collaborative place. It can be used for group work and discussions, but when you’re in the L (learning lab), it’s intended to be a quiet place and students are in there expecting not to be bothered.” Chris and his staff did a tour with every student in the building to make sure the expectations were clear. They had a few minor setbacks with attendance procedures, but they were able to develop an electronic sign-in system that student accessed with their school IDs and cell phones. Things were moving smoothly until the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Star Tribune newspaper intervened.

Chris initially asked MDE if the “no sub” plan met the state requirements for student seat time, but he never received a solid yes or no. He decided to go forward with the plan and if MDE wanted to reprimand him then he would address it at a later time. In addition, the Star Tribune newspaper ran an article that did not tell people the purpose of the “no sub” change. Chris was left to answer a lot of questions, was being bashed on radio stations, Facebook, and other media outlets. Chris invited each person to the school that complained to see how effective the process was working. Chris explained the interactions:

When the Star Tribune wrote the article, it was intended to be an article about flexible spaces, but they need to sell papers, so the editor finds out how we afforded to build the spaces and runs an article on us not using subs. Then I got blasted with emails from subs all over the country. I even had some former colleagues of mine that I coached varsity football with that were questioning me; I’m like, “What the hell are you doing? I see you posting to your Facebook page all the time and I know that you’re subbing.” Then you take it and say fine. You’re a chemistry teacher and you want your kid to learn chemistry, but the only sub we can get in education is a Phy-Ed teacher in a chemistry classroom. It doesn’t make sense. Whereas you could just communicate that lesson to the students and let them do it. They get it. They’ve been sitting in your classroom for nine weeks.

Chris had a specific example that reiterated his point. Chris explained the situation:

I had a sub come in and she said, “I totally get it. I’m not here to complain or anything, but I just want you to know I teach kids every time I’m here.” I’m like, “Oh great.” She said, “For example, I’m not very good at math, but I teach kids about the animals I see when I’m in Florida every winter.” I wanted to say, “Can I take this tape recorder and just record that. Can you say that for me again out loud,” because it proved my point exactly.

While many positive results came out of the experience, it had been difficult for Chris to get public support because he and his staff had worked so diligently to make sure the transition ran smoothly for staff, students and community members. Most of those within the school culture adapted quickly; it was the outsiders who caused stress for Chris. Currently, his school still operated with a “no sub” procedure and other schools in the district had slowly begun to explore the idea at their school.

Chris’s crucible was out of his hands because outsiders looking into his school created the messy situation, but our next participant, Tyler experienced a crucible during his own staff meeting.

Shifting Staff Mindset at a Staff Meeting

Tyler, at a certain point during his principalship at Honest High School, started to realize a few staff members were not as engaged during staff meetings as he would have liked. They did things in faculty meetings they would never let their students do in their classroom. Tyler explained the incident:

I’m at the podium delivering our staff development session and I look up and I see a majority of the staff misbehaving. I stopped and I lost it. I went off script. I don’t know what I said. I went into another zone, and bottom-line, that was where the phrase either believe what I’m saying, behave as if you believe or get the hell out of our way, we’ve got important work to do. I was not behind the podium when I said this. I was out in the audience and I was pissed and they knew it. For the first time, I realized the importance of you don’t do your work behind the podium. You do your work at the edge of the stage, and if you screw up, screw up full speed, just tell the truth. That is back to management of self. What it also was for me, it became a phrase that really started to make sense to people, and it gave them choices. Believe it, behave as if you believe it, and if you pick a third option, you’re cheating the kids and let’s be clear, we don’t cheat kids on our watch.

Initially, Tyler felt embarrassed when this happened because he was relatively young and there were many strong veteran teachers in the audience, however, 75 % of the faculty stood up and started clapping. Tyler thought, “Holy crap, what did I just say?” But he realized for the first time in his career, he had expressed outrage, and that was important to show his staff. It became okay for Tyler to stand up for the vision the group had worked so hard to produce. Tyler explained the attitude he was trying to create with his staff:

Number one, I really believe this crap, number two, you think I’m nuts, let me show you how serious our staff is about treating kids well. They will chew you up and spit you out long before I get to you if they catch you cheating kids. We’ve got a faculty, serious faculty members, that really get it. We don’t screw around. We run fast; we jump; we work hard. If you don’t like it, leave. We’ll help you.

The attitudes of staff members started to become amazingly positive. The hard working staff members really helped others change their attitude. Tyler was shocked at how different people acted in such a short period of time.

Tyler believed, “That’s the magic of some of these lessons that we learn along the way. It takes you two years to figure it out. It takes you two minutes to do it, and if you just keep doing it and you’re real about it, people get it.” Tyler learned a few important lessons that day. First, he learned “If you’re going to make mistakes, make them full speed, people will respect you for that tenacity.” This incident was just a sudden leadership experience that no one planned, but it changed how people in the building perceived Tyler as a leader and they respected him more because of it. Second, Tyler learned the importance of living in the world you want it to be. Tyler explained the premises of this idea:

As a principal, you've got to live in the world as you want it to be. People need to hear you, they need to see you, they need to smell you, they need to feel you. They needed somebody to come back from the future and tell them what it's going to be like. That's what principals do. Principals play back to the future every single day, if they're doing it right. Nobody understands what the word mission means. Nobody truly understands what the word vision means, but they do understand it when you put it into real words and you start to paint pictures. Don't just talk about the vision; paint the picture. Don't just write a mission, tell the story, be the story.

Tyler's story shows how quick crucibles can happen. In a similar story, Rob discussed his leadership journey and the different ways he has adapted to the changes in society throughout his career.

Adaptive Leadership as a Lead Learner and Change Agent

Rob has been a high school principal for over 20 years and when he reflected on his experiences, he felt the most challenging crucible he has overcome has been the changing expectations of his role as the lead principal. Early in Rob's career, he felt his job was to be a manager, to make sure all of the staff and students were safe, secure, and doing their job. As time has gone on, Rob now feels his job is to be a "lead learner," to collaboratively move the work in his building forward by empowering students and staff to learn. He still emphasized the importance of his work as a manager, but discussed how being the lead learner has taken over much of his daily work activities. Throughout this transformation phase, many external factors shifted in education putting more emphasis on growth, data, and accountability. With increased pressure, Rob began to self-examine his ability to be an adaptive leader. Four key learning's have taken place over the course of Rob's career.

First, Rob explained the hardest part of his journey was realizing the work started with him:

I've realized that my own thirst for learning and for collaborative work has been probably the best experience for me as a principal. I think you learn a lot by continually self-evaluating your own effectiveness and how well you continue to be an avid, tenacious learner. I think at the core principals are change agents and you have to be able to learn to make that happen. You have to be well read, well learned, deeply involved in shared practice around everything; people can read through you pretty quickly if you're only talking the talk and not walking the walk, so there's no surface level learning here. It has to be pretty deep and pretty involved but at the same time it has to be collaborative and it has to be shared. Leadership means you're at least a step in front of it so that you can resonate better with your vision and your clarity.

Rob realized his own personal growth dictated how far his school could go in the long run. As he began to invest in his own personal growth, he realized he needed to take calculated risks and potentially experience failure along the way in front of others to gain their trust and model how learning works.

Rob's second key learning experience came when he was required to become an instructional leader. Rob claimed he learned how to lead in this capacity through "many conversations, consultations, coaching meetings, readings, and interactions with people." He noted it is important to be strategic because you cannot jump on top of everything. In addition, Rob emphasized the importance of instructional leadership:

Part of a principal's job is to talk to teachers about their work, and if you're not well crafted and finessed it won't go well. Back in the nineties, early two thousands, that wasn't the job of a principal. Now as we're getting into accountability, and we're dealing with students who've been marginalized, we're starting to realize that we're getting into an all means all world, where every student has to excel, and we can't just leave certain kids behind. Talking about instruction has become a major part of the job.

Rob also discussed the importance of knowing key instructional strategies, modeling those strategies at staff meetings, and being able to identify people who truly know and are passionate about their content. By being able to relate to the content and have meaningful conversations with teachers, Rob believes his instructional leadership capacity has grown throughout his career.

Rob's third key learning experience came when he understood how to navigate change as a principal. In education people have always said, "It's one more thing, what's next, what's the next flavor of the month." Rob's key learning has been how to make it seem like the next initiative is just another piece of the puzzle and to make sure his staff knows how it fits nicely into the master vision. Rob explained:

Principals need to understand adaptive leadership. Being very reflective in that learning, getting deeper and deeper into what it means in terms of how to implement and integrate the kind of ideas that are essential to build a sustainable change effort. Michael Fullan's work on change, the push, pull and nudge idea, and recognizing the styles of people that you can work with and leverage their skills and their styles. Knowing how to leverage and distribute leadership and support leadership so it's a collaborative effort.

Rob emphasized the work will be uncomfortable and rarely will principals have the opportunity to operate at equilibrium. However, that is the work; principals need to be in the middle of high stress work to create change. Rob described it as, "If you're going into school leadership, you need [to] recognize that you're going into an area where you want to keep the pressure cooker from blowing off, but you want to keep the heat high because change is moving fast." One of the important ingredients of change leadership is the ability to work collaboratively.

Rob's fourth key learning experience understood the importance of collaborative learning and leadership. Rob explained his learning:

Principals need to let go of the hero approach. There is no such thing as one person with all the solutions, so, building capacity in others to lead is essential. All of the solutions we have come up with at my school have been a matter of relying on the strengths of people coming together to lead the work with me. Having a shared vision is a good way to build collaborative culture and then you can shift the structures and the systems to start building that momentum around adult professional learning. Principals should surround themselves with leaders in their buildings so that people can all move in the same direction.

In the end, people want to work with happy people. Rob believed modeling happy behaviors and allowing staff to have fun on their growth journey is also a pivotal part of his job. Rob mentioned advice for aspiring principals:

This leadership journey takes time and will not happen overnight. My advice is get on the journey. It isn't easy, it's going to require tremendous amount of learning, but stay curious and ask a lot of questions. When you're stressed out, stay curious. When you're angry stay curious. When you're in a hot spot, ask questions. You're here to help people solve a lot of their own problems. You're not here to fix them. Trust the process; you don't need to micromanage.

The next section of this chapter includes stories related to staffing decisions. Four participants described crucible experiences involving staff discipline or removal. I begin with a story told by Kyle, who pink slipped a group of probationary teachers in their last year before being tenured.

Section Three: Staffing Decisions

Removing Probationary Teachers in Year Three

Kyle was in his fourth year of a new lead principalship, after being an administrator in other buildings for fourteen years. In the spring, Kyle and his administrative team needed to determine their staffing needs for the following school year including which probationary teachers they wanted to retain. Four teachers, in their third and final year of being At Will employees, had woven themselves into various committees, extracurricular activities, and the social soil of the building. What happened next surprised and devastated these teachers, while simultaneously creating a lack of trust amongst the administrators and teaching staff. Kyle explained what happened:

We allowed four probationary teachers to get to their third year in their probationary process, before we decided we're not going to give them a contract the 4th year, which would be granting them tenure. We had some concerns with them year two, and those concerns continued year three. In essence, they're all new teachers; first year, they showed good growth. We saw minimal growth year two, and year three they hit a plateau. We ended up having multiple administrators go and observe to make sure that what we were seeing was accurate; it wasn't a bias between an administrator and a teacher. Ultimately, we sat around the table in the spring, and ultimately we discussed what we were going to do with these four teachers. The decision was that we were going to not renew them.

The administrative team notified the four probationary teachers of the nonrenewal of their contracts the Thursday before Good Friday, and the day lives on as "Black Thursday." Kyle and his administrative team spoke to all four of the probationary teacher's right after school on Thursday, allowing them to have a long weekend to comprehend the news. Kyle and his team could not sleep well that night. They felt responsible for these teachers failing. Kyle received several emails and phone calls from other staff members over the weekend asking, "Where was the coaching, the conversations, the leadership?" Kyle knew they had in-depth conversations with these teachers during their observations and provided them constructive feedback, but what he realized is they really did not coach these people to victory. They provided them with information and feedback, but there was no coaching. Kyle felt like he failed these teachers and claimed, "I or we as an administrative team were probably 25% responsible for these teachers failing." That summer, Kyle got his administrative team around a table and decided they needed to create a plan to make sure the same situation did not happen again. Kyle explained the conversation:

Talking with my team, I said, “Look, we got to do something about this. We’ve all released a fair amount of teachers, but this just didn’t sit well. The performance [of the teachers] wasn’t there, I get that, but it was the process, the coaching year two and year three that we need to take a better look at. We started reflecting on, what do they do in the new teacher workshop? What happens within the department? Who are they working with? What is our role as an administrator with regards to providing them direction? Being crystal clear in our post observation conferences with the teachers in regards to where improvement needs to be made. Our ultimate decision was to create a probationary teacher program. Not only to tell the new teachers about the nuts and bolts, and what you have to do and don’t do, but we actually started talking about, what do we want to see in their classrooms. How’s it going to look? Failure will take place, but it’s a growth component, and you have to try, we have to see these things, you have to grow; reflection became a big component.

Kyle and his team came up with a program they felt comfortable implementing, but a huge lack of trust had been established amongst the teaching staff because of the “Black Thursday” incident. As Kyle and his team started the next school year, they could tell the vibe in the air was different and uncomfortable. They tried to do nice things for staff, like bagels at staff meetings, notes in their mailboxes on their birthdays, and positive comments every week, but they could not get the climate of the school back.

Kyle admitted this was a crucible experience because it has continued to affect his ability to lead for over three years. He is still working to improve the relationships within the building and reestablish the trust necessary to run an effective school. He does not want his staff living in fear and wants them to realize he has learned from this lesson, but it has been a process. Kyle is pleased with his current probationary teacher program and feels much better prepared to have difficult conversations with teachers who are not pulling their weight. With the safe guards and procedures in place, he can sleep easy at night now if he has to let a probationary teacher go. Our next story involves a new principal firing a well-known and respected coach from the community.

Removing a Powerful Coach

Jane, in her second year as a lead high school principal, decided to fire the head hockey coach. During her first year as principal things went relatively smoothly; she surveyed the land, built relationships, and made minor changes to the system. But, she always had a feeling in her gut something was off with the hockey coach and his program. As soon as the hockey season started during her first year she noticed, “The hockey players would walk around the school as if they were gods. They would yell and scream at staff members, show up late to first period because they had practice in the mornings, and demand breakfast, even when breakfast was over.” These behaviors seemed odd from a group of people who were supposed to be the leaders of the school. Jane had a few informal conversations with the coach during her first year about what she was seeing around the school. The coach acknowledged her concerns, but never made any changes. Then a major event happened that got Jane’s attention. Jane explained the event:

As the first season progressed, I started hearing from parents, I started hearing from teachers about concerns that they’d had from previous years about how the program had gone down, and so I just knew I had to keep my eye on it. Then during playoffs one of our best and brightest seniors actually got into a fight with another player from the other team. It was so bad that the game was called and it made the news. That’s when I was like, “We’ve got a problem.” When my athletic director is calling me on a Thursday night, saying, “This is what happened, this is going to be on the news.” “What?” Okay, this is a problem.

Jane and the athletic director contacted the coach and told him he needed to “clean up the program and do some damage control with the community.” The coach promised to make the necessary changes throughout the off-season. For the rest of the school year Jane didn’t hear much from the hockey coach, until he requested to host a summer event to raise money for the hockey program. Jane approved the permit for the team to use the gymnasium. The hockey

coach and his well-connected family organized the event. Jane explained what happened at the event:

There was an incident that happened in our school gym that was tied to this coach and our players. An actual shooting took place down the street from the school that was tied to this particular event. That was it for me to move forward with my gut feeling that I might need to get rid of this coach.

After this event took place, Jane immediately called her assistant superintendent. Jane explained the conversation:

I told her, this is the situation, this is the coach, this is what's happened, I have concerns, and these are my concerns, and I just want to make sure that if I release this coach, you all will support me. She said that she would support me. I knew that my admin team had my back, so I met with the athletic director, and I let the athletic director know what my concerns were and what my moves were going to be. I released the coach.

However, during the dismissal meeting, the hockey coach was not willing to accept Jane's explanation for her decision that "we are moving in a different direction." He was argumentative and refused to end the meeting. Jane knew this was going to be a big deal. The next day a community attack on Jane began because in some minds she was "wrong and didn't value the community." A group of community members presented a petition to the local churches asking individuals to support having "the principal removed and the coach reinstated." The coach's removal made the news and was discussed on many local radio stations because of how involved the coach was with the community. The coach brought a lawsuit forward on the district and Jane for unlawful termination. For the next four months, Jane had meetings with district personnel, lawyers, teachers, community members, and board members. She was scrutinized on Facebook, the media, and within her school by her teachers. Jane explained the experience:

For four months I am in this continual fight, to the extent, that my dad had to escort me to a meeting at the district office, to meet with the coach and his attorney. My dad had to be my security. It became that volatile. At night, when I left work, I had to have the engineers in the building walk me to my truck. It became that crazy and that wild, and so of course, for those four months, I'm saying, "Man, did I make the right decision? Was this worth it? This has been bananas, this is crazy." Of course, I'm still standing. I won, the school won, the boys won. As the principal, I saw mediocrity. I saw our boys being put in unsafe situations. I saw our school being put in unsafe situations, but everyone else couldn't see that because they were all used to this person, and they were afraid of the power that his network had. I'm not afraid of the power his network had, this is what I see for your child, and this is what I see for our school. This is what I see for the community, so, no, I'm moving this direction.

Jane had a lot of support from her church, administration team, district personnel, some concerned parents, and her family, but it was a difficult time. She realized she was jeopardizing her career because she was still relatively new and this incident was so public. In the end, Jane won the lawsuit because they began to audit the coach and his program. They realized he had been pocketing fundraising money that was intended for the program; so, he stopped his suit.

Jane claimed she learned a lot through dealing with this crucible:

Really, this event made me stronger, and I think it really showed the community and my staff that I will fight the fight. I will fight for what I believe in for my school and the students. For me personally, my tenacity and my willingness to persist, although I'm dealing with massive amounts of resistance and pressure from external people to rescind my decision; it just made me stronger and it made me wiser as a leader and principal.

Jane's story was difficult, but she managed to get through it and is still leading the charge for that building. The next story involved David and his difficulties removing a tenured teacher who was unfit to continue as an educator.

Failure to Remove a Teacher No Longer Fit for Educating Students

David, in his second year as a lead principal, started to receive parent and student complaints about one of his oldest teachers in the building using discipline in inappropriate ways. He never observed this teacher being physically abusive to students, but the way he spoke to the students and his way of disciplining them was demeaning and inappropriate. One

complaint came from a parent who said, “This teacher made my son stand in the corner and look at the wall for 20 minutes, while his peers laughed and made jokes at him.” Another complaint described the teacher making “the entire class stand when a chair tipped over.” In one particular case, a student had just had knee surgery, and was supposed to have his knee on ice and elevated if possible, but this teacher still required him to stand because another student tipped over a chair. The knee became swollen and irritated by all of the weight.

David started to “document, document, document,” he also began to do extra walkthroughs to see what was taking place in this teacher’s classroom. As David realized these claims were true, he went to the district Human Resources Department to find out what his next steps could be. David wrote the teacher up for the knee incident and gave him a verbal directive that he “needed to change his student behavior management system and [incidents like these] shouldn’t happen again.” The teacher’s union representative represented the teacher at the meeting and agreed to work with the teacher on these particular claims.

As time went on, David did not see major improvement in this teacher’s ability to educate students, but the teacher was smart enough not to employ any of these inappropriate behavior tactics in David’s presence. David had informal and formal conversations with the teacher about pedagogy and effective teaching strategies, but the teacher only partially implemented them or did just enough to get by. In the end of David’s second year, he was able to get the teacher on a performance enhancement plan because he did not show enough progress during his summative year: however, the performance enhancement plan provided the teacher a minimum two years to learn, grow, and show improvement. This was extremely frustrating to David because he did not think this teacher was fit to be in the classroom any longer, and he didn’t like that students had to

be subjected to him for two years before David could terminate him. David provided more details:

The teacher was old and having health problems, he would max out all of his sick leave and personal time and be at school one minute before his contract and leave immediately after school when his contract was over. He was not invested in the kids, school, or getting better, but all I could do was try to coach him through this plan until his time ran out.

David tried to make the teacher uncomfortable, in hopes that he would retire, by not giving him the prep he desired, moving him to a smaller classroom, and overloading him with different courses, but the teacher did not retire. This chess match lasted for two years and David was not able to find enough detail that Human Resources and the teacher union warranted as adequate for termination. At the end of his fourth year, two and one-half years into working with this teacher, David took a job at a larger school. David remembered calling a friend to see if the teacher was still there three years after he had left and the answer was “yes.”

David learned that despite his best efforts, some situations are beyond a principal’s control. David mentioned this situation still bugged him and, now recognizes he brought this situation home a lot during that time. He often sat at the kitchen table with his laptop open while his wife and kids played in the living room. He wished he had a better work/life balance at the time because he thinks it affected some of the relationships he had with his family members. David ended by saying, “Always remember that your kids and your family or whatever your situation is, your significant other, that those people are important. Your life is important. Your health is important. You can’t be a good principal until you’ve taken care of all that.”

The next story has to do with the resignation of a tenured teacher in the middle of the school year, and a huge teacher uprising that affected the climate and culture of the building moving forward.

Managing a Hostile Staff after a Teacher Discharge

Jane was in her fourth year as the lead principal at Strong High School when the climate and culture of the building became hostile after a well-respected tenured teacher named Bob abruptly retired in the middle of February. Jane was a tough willed principal at Strong, and in fact was the first African American female principal to run the school. Over the course of her first four years, Jane made some controversial decisions about the structure and operations of the building that did not sit well with the predominant tenured Caucasian staff.

As Jane began her fourth year, she told the staff during workshop week, “There would be a heightened effort to support the African American male students who have historically led the school in suspensions, failures, behavior referrals, and lowest graduation rates.” Many of the staff members confronted Jane about this initiative and said, “But what about white male achievement? What about Asian male achievement? What about ALL of our students?” Jane was clear that all of the students mattered, but she wanted staff to place an emphasis on the most underachieving students to see if the achievement gap could be reduced. Tension in the building between Jane and the staff began to rise.

Strong High School was historically a teacher run school because many of their past principals used the school as a springboard to their next job; only staying at the school one to three years at the most. Even though the respected teacher, Bob, was never the “principal,” many staff members looked to him as the informal principal of the school because of his many years of investment in the students, staff, and community. Bob’s angst with Jane and the district became apparent when Jane started to hold Bob accountable for not completing all of his summative observation requirements. Bob did not like the fact that the “new” principal was

trying to be so direct with him and not give him the benefit of the doubt based on his experience and popularity in the community.

As the school year progressed, the tension around all of the emphasis and work the building was doing on African American male student achievement grew. Bob, being one of the oldest, most experienced teachers, continued to challenge and confront Jane about her leadership with this particular initiative. Jane continued to be clear to her staff about expectations and accountability. Bob decided in the beginning of February that he wasn't going to fulfill all of his promises in regards to this initiative and "forgot to do some of his work." Jane responded by calling a meeting with the district's teacher union rep, but, before the meeting could even take place, Bob had turned in his retirement papers, effective immediately.

Jane immediately called the district's communication department to draft letters to be sent to staff, students, and community members. Bob was placed on a gag order by the district, so he was not able to speak about his retirement to anyone. Bob knew based on his popularity with the students, staff, and school that his abrupt retirement would create a huge backlash; and he was right. The next day when Jane got to school she had a group of students waiting at her office with a petition claiming she had "forced Bob to retire" and that she needed to "retract this move immediately." Jane called a staff meeting for that afternoon to explain the situation:

I had to stand before my staff and listen to them rip me. Rip me apart. They said, “You’re threatening, you’re intimidating, you target people. I don’t feel safe here, I don’t feel emotionally safe.” I had to listen to all of that before my whole staff. When he retired, the staff said, “He didn’t retire. You made him quit.” I said, “I didn’t make him quit. He retired on his own.” They responded with, “Whatever, you made him quit.” They didn’t believe my story. They said that I made him quit, though he retired, and from there, the tension in the building grew to an all-time high. The tension was so thick in the building that I would just go to my office, and I would only go out in the hallway during passing time, or only to do observations. I minimized my contact with my staff because it was just that bad. I had to survive. They weren’t happy, and they were fearful. It was like, “Who’s next?” Nobody’s next. I don’t decide, “Oh, okay, I’m coming for you, and I’m going to do this.” No, when I had a folder three inches thick of what a staff member should do and what he didn’t do, and how I have been working with him the last four years, as the principal of this school and he decides to retire, what do I do? I used progressive discipline, and so in that process, he decided to retire, and that was the fallout.

Immediately after the situation unfolded intimidating Facebook posts about Jane from staff, students, and community members were revealed. Members of the community went to the school board to complain about Jane and recommend she get fired for her actions. In addition, the teaching staff at Strong High School required a school climate survey be issued at the end of the school year. Jane knew it wasn’t going to be good, but told the staff all results would get posted in the staff lounge, so everything was transparent. When the results came out, multiple comments stated, “We have a culture of fear, the principal must go”. Jane was forced to endure this throughout the remainder of the school year.

Throughout this entire experience, Jane leaned on her parents, assistant principals, church, and principal network to navigate the situation. She talked to these people in private and made sure she had done the right thing and was moving in a positive direction with the staff. Towards the end of that school year, she was able to bring a consultant to the school and speak about trust, race, and leadership. She felt this was a great way to break the ice with the staff and try to get back to a level playing field. It did not work with all of the teachers, but many began to open up and trust Jane again. Jane also stood in front of the staff and said, “If you have ever felt

like you were a target, that's never been my intent. I don't target people. I don't desire to target people, but I do have high expectations and I will hold you accountable. It's never about me targeting people." By being vulnerable in front of her staff she was able to break down some of those barriers and start to repair relationships one at a time. Jane stayed at the school for one more year and then decided to take a lead principal job closer to home.

After reflecting on the entire experience, Jane said:

I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything, because they made me who I am today. I have been told that I'm very strong willed, but to actually be tested and tried, and to pass the tests, to be victorious in the very tenuous, high-stress situations, you know what? They shaped who I am as a leader.

Jane's experience revealed a challenging leadership situation that she felt was outside of her control. As with the other three stories in this section, the relationships and staffing decisions principals make have a profound impact on the climate of the building. The next section highlights four stories about death and tragedy and reveals how four principals tried to handle it.

Section Four: Death and Tragedy

Leading a Grieving School After a School Shooting

Kyle took over as head principal at Grieving High School 11 months after a school shooting that took two students lives. In Kyle's first order of duty, he was asked to plan the one-year anniversary ceremony for the students and staff during the school day. Not having a point of reference for what happened at the school or how difficult the last year had been for the students, staff, and community, Kyle spent a lot of time listening. Kyle explained some of the aspects he had to consider when planning the ceremony:

I can remember we had some contentious conversations within the planning committee. All positive, but we were dealing with a lot of emotions, there were two or three staff members that were still out on leave of absences. We also had a graduating class, because one of the students that got shot was a 9th grader, so we had to deal with his graduating class too, and how we were going to deal with that. You had a whole host of tentacles of the shooting that were still alive and present, both in the building and in the community. Ultimately, we came to a point of saying that our ceremony during the school day, was going to be for our students, and our staff. That we were only going to let in a very small amount of graduates from that class before. I remember a couple of the parents coming up to me and, because we had to turn away some of the kids, because there was a community event that evening which they could attend. Again, “How dare you? You’re being disrespectful to the two students that passed away. You have no right being here.” I knew full well that it was their emotions that were speaking.

The entire year was a learning experience for Kyle because it was more about listening and counseling then guiding and leading. He had no memory of the event, which was both good and bad. He had to make sure when he was facilitating meetings “to clarify, listen, and suspend judgment because [he] wasn’t there.” He didn’t have a point of reference, so he was relying on what he felt were the stable instructors in the building to provide him with insight that was accurate and positive. Kyle spent a lot of time listening to staff members, police officers, the superintendent, and students. He tried to provide them with whatever they needed, therapists, counselors, time off, etc. to get them through the experience. Kyle explained how he tried to balance the responsibility of educating the students with empathy:

The way that it ultimately turned out is that by showing compassion, and suspending my judgment, yet still telling and reaffirming the parents that, number 1, it’s a safe school, and number 2, we are still going to educate your child. As I continued to nudge the staff to remind them, “Yes, you’re going through a traumatic experience, but also keep in mind folks, we have to still educate our kids. We’re still going to produce a valedictorian that year; we’re still going to produce a top 10, top 20. We still need to get these graduates across the stage, and we still need to prepare them for their post-secondary educations.” It was a balancing act of, how much do you go back out and push to where you let them just go and be able to grieve. Identifying which ones are truly grieving, and trying to get them out of the classroom as quickly as possible, and get them help first of all, but then also bringing in a suitable replacement so they can do the job.

Kyle over communicated everything that could alarm the staff or students. He explained some of the situations that occurred that he had to communicate to the stakeholders immediately:

Three years that I was there, it ebbed and flowed. When anything took place outside of the school district, it would impact us. Another school had a shooting, which impacted us. Even though it was 200 miles to the north, that brought the staff right back to the day of the shooting. Any time the ambulance came, I would immediately have to send out an email to staff saying, “Hey, ambulance came to get an 11th grade student due to an asthma attack. They’re fine, or their being transported to the hospital for examination.” Any time that they heard a siren, they were going to go into survival mode and flash back. We didn’t allow any helicopters to land, because that was the serious part of it. We did not practice one lockdown drill in two years, not one. The third year we had one and it lasted about fifteen seconds. We just wanted to get back in that routine of it, and trying it. Nothing got decided quickly in that first year. I would take an idea, run it through a group. Take an idea, run it through another group. Bring a couple groups together, key members, and everybody’s poking holes in it, feeling good about it, okay, off we go. There were very few decisions made with regards to the shooting, or the celebration, or anything in the healing process that didn’t go through multiple sets of individuals, and that includes the students.

In the end, Kyle learned how important it is to listen in times of tragedy, to understand the full context of the situation, especially concerning events that occurred before one’s tenure. The next story describes the situation of a student death on a field trip and how the principal managed the aftermath.

Loss of Student Life on the District’s Watch

Harry was the principal at Success High School when he received a phone call from one of his physical education teachers telling him something horrible had just happened at the pool, and he needed to get down there right away. When Harry arrived at the pool, paramedics and police officers were trying to revive a student who presumably had been under water for a few minutes without anyone knowing. Harry immediately cleared the pool area of all students and staff members to allow the professionals space and privacy. He then called the superintendent and notified him. The paramedics transported the student to the hospital, but in the end the student passed away, cause of death: drowning.

Harry spent the rest of that day in phase 1, which he called “emergency response mode.” He had to call parents and notify them of the accident, send email communication home to students, staff, and community members, make sure everyone else was safe, and make sure the swimming pool was closed down until further notice. Harry called the school district’s emergency response team to the building to help him navigate the situation and handle anything that came up. The district was bombarded with news and media outlets once the word spread. Harry was not able to make any detailed statements because there were a lot of unknowns at the time. He tried to express sorrow for the student’s family, staff, and community, but did not share details on the incident.

The next few days after the incident Harry and his team were in what he called “phase 2-counseling and support phase.” In this phase Harry made sure all of the students and staff that needed to grieve had a counselor available to talk to. He answered many media phone calls and interviews. He worked with the secretary to make sure students and staff could attend the funeral, and people were able to properly remember the student at a school memorial ceremony and fundraiser for the family.

After about a week, Harry and his team entered what he called “phase 3-legal phase.” Three separate investigations by the school district, police, and lawyers for the victim’s family were taking place at the same time. Harry began his investigation to find out if any of the students or employees were at fault in this incident. Harry worked closely with the school resource officer and city police department to interview students and staff members. Harry had to put teachers on paid administrative leave until he could find out the facts and determine what course of discipline action was appropriate. Harry met with representatives of the teachers’ union who were trying to protect their employees. Harry claimed he spent about 18 hours at

work each day for a week after the incident. The entirety of the legal phase took about one year until it was completely resolved.

After the investigation concluded, Harry and the team had identified one staff member who was at fault for not following the supervision rules and policies while using the pool. He called this “phase 4-discipline.” Harry and the teacher, who had been on paid leave for over a year, knew the outcome would be having the teacher leave the district. Harry explained how he went about this process:

My philosophy is win-win, stick together. As soon as you are on sides, “I want to win. No, I want to win,” then you’re sunk. You’re both going to lose. How do you not break bridges? How do you maintain relationships? How do you do this cooperatively? At the end of our pool drowning, the teacher that eventually we were going to fire, thanked me for protecting his privacy, protecting his dignity. I could have badmouthed him in the public and threw him under the bus, blamed him, but we didn’t. We took responsibility as a district. We didn’t blame him. Behind the scenes we were going to fire him, but we didn’t do it in public. He was able to move on and get another job. We paid his salary while we investigated the situation. We gave him plenty of heads up and said, “This is going to end in you not being here. We don’t want to do this in public. We don’t want to drag it out and go through mediation, after mediation, after mediation. We’ll pay you to this point, but then we’re going to fire you. You have a chance to get another job.” I’m always trying to find a win-win and do the hard things in private and do the good things in public.

After the lawsuits had settled and the employee had moved on, the district entered “phase 5-policy change.” Harry needed to meet with the school board, parents, teachers, and students to make sure the policies, procedures, curriculum, etc. were all fixed or modified to make sure an accident like this never happened again on his watch. Harry spent another few weeks if not months making sure the policies were effective and being utilized by his employees.

Harry was glad his people were able to stick together through such a difficult tragedy, but realized the operational side of his leadership really needed to shine in a traumatic event like this. He learned the important steps that he had to take as a principal and leader of the school to make sure education still took place alongside the grieving. He learned to speak to the media, try to

keep it positive, and never place blame. Harry claimed he never was more stressed in his life and actually had to go to the hospital for a day during this experience to recoup and recharge. In the end, his greatest takeaway was the importance of being there throughout the process for people - listening to their concerns, sorrow, or whatever else they might need to share. The next story involved a student being murdered and how the principal responded.

Dealing With a Student Being Murdered

Paul was the principal of one of the most affluent school districts in the state. 93 % of his student and staff were white, with only 7 % identifying as other races. On a warm October Tuesday night, Paul received a phone call from a hysterical parent at 11 pm. He could barely understand her, but he was able to learn one of his students had been murdered by gunfire that night in another community. Paul knew he had to do something immediately. He contacted his administrative team and superintendent to devise a plan.

The next morning, the district's emergency response team, school counselors, and teachers welcomed students and staff at the door. Paul called an emergency staff meeting at 7 am to inform the staff of the tragedy. Many staff members were extremely upset because the student who was murdered was well liked and well known around the school. Paul described the student:

This student came to us from the city, and was a young man of color. Everyone loved him, and he was doing such wonderful things in our school, and had really started to believe in the will and skill concept, and had really found his voice in the school as a leader, and as a student, and was just hitting his stride.

Before he held the staff meeting, Paul sent an email and voicemail to all the families explaining the situation. He wanted to be intentional in his communication, to try and let everyone know before the news outlets began to tell the story. As the school day started, Paul did not like how the crisis response team was handling the situation. Many of the black students wanted to grieve

together and be with each other. At this time the school district's policy was to allow students to grieve individually with a counselor or to stay in class. Paul explained how he handled the situation:

The crisis team came to the high school, and they started going through this policy and I said, "All of y'all can leave right now because this is not how we're going to manage this moment. I grew up in the deep South. My father was native, my mother was white, and I grew up in an African American community. I know how they handle loss and death, and the way you're trying to manage this will explode and blow up poorly in my face. We're not doing it that way, so you can pack your crap and leave." I had a private gathering of students of color and parents of color that very next day. It was a unique and wonderful situation, to manage the grief and the loss. We had so many kids come in, and I set up a safe space, and I said, "Okay, first of all, we're so sorry for the loss of our student and your friend, and we need to have some space that you can share some stories and spend some time. I don't care how long it takes. If it takes all day, we'll be here all day, until every story is heard." At that moment, the voice of our students of color at our school was not only heard, but respected. Everyone in the room went around and shared their moments, and it was therapeutic.

Paul felt like the students who were allowed to grieve the way they wanted to felt empowered after that day and truly appreciated their principal. He was proud of his administrative team's work and glad they decided to go against the school policy. In addition, Paul spent a lot of time managing rumors and micro-aggressions from parents, staff, and students. Paul explained this process:

We had to manage the rumors. "Well, he was a gangster." Well, I don't think this kid was a gangster. The kid was one of the nicest human beings on the face of the earth. I think he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. You have to manage all of those rumors and all those speculations that are micro-aggressions of race. The micro-aggressions were coming out like, "Well, how can you do all of this for a kid that we think was in a gang?" "He was in a gang because he was black? Don't say that ever again to me. You don't know that." "Well, you didn't do it this way when we lost a white kid." Then there were so many things that weren't said, that came up months later, even from our own staff. "How could you take kids out of class to be in there to talk for a day?" It manifested itself immediately and over time. I handled the micro-aggressions directly and aggressively. We shouldn't make assumptions about people that we don't know. "I knew the kid, you didn't know the kid. The kid was never in your class." At the end of the day, the student was a member of our school.

After the funeral and a few weeks had past, Paul decided to bring the students diploma to his mother's house as a sign of his gratitude to the family for allowing their student to go to his high school. He felt this was a powerful moment for the mother as her son had struggled in school, but he had been on the right track and was scheduled to graduate just three weeks later.

In the end, Paul thought the most powerful learning experience for him was when he had to stand up to district policy and micro-aggressions throughout the experience. He knew what he was doing was right, but at the time many people pushed back on him. It was a time sensitive decision, so he was happy with how they managed the situation, but acknowledged it was difficult to push through. Paul's stated advice for new or aspiring principals:

Take a moment and try to reflect on the right thing to do, and sometimes you're the only person standing in the gap for that person or that situation. Don't be afraid to do that. Eventually, someone else will come along beside you, and another one, and another one, and another one, but don't be afraid of loneliness when you're trying to do the right thing, because you will feel all alone a lot as a principal. You have to get comfortable with that.

The next story involves a student getting sick and dying overnight.

Handling a Sudden Student Death

Tom had ten plus years of experience being the lead principal at Winning High School when he received a phone call from one of his student's uncles. The uncle said "Tom, we know you will do this right. I've been asked to call you because my nephew is basically dead." Tom did not know what to say as the student had been in school the day before. Tom knew the student well and was aware he had left school the day before because he wasn't feeling well. The uncle explained the student was diagnosed with non-contagious meningitis and was on life support so they could salvage his organs. The student had basically passed away within 12 hours of feeling the symptoms. Tom was floored. The uncle went on to ask Tom to inform the

student's friends and school community of this tragic incident. Tom complied and told the uncle how terribly sorry he was to hear the news.

After hanging up the phone with the uncle, Tom immediately called all of his assistant principals, secretaries, and counselors into a conference room to notify them of the situation and devise a plan. He asked the counselors to create a list of students whom they thought were friends of the student and write them passes to the theater. He asked the secretaries to filter any phone calls about the situation directly to him and to be aware that students might start coming down to the office upset when they hear the news. Tom left a voicemail for the superintendent notifying him of the situation and asking for assistance. Tom explained what steps he took to find the student's friends and let them know the terrible news:

I went into a classroom and said, "Hey, such-and-such needs some help at home, are any of you his friends?" A couple of kids raised their hand. I said, "Please come with me, you're going to help me with this." I asked those students, "Who are some more friends of his?" We then picked them up from their classes and went to the theatre. We ended up picking up 18 close friends of his, and obviously bringing them in and telling them what was going on was very difficult to do, but handled it with kid gloves. I obviously notified all the parents what was going on, that I needed to talk to their son or daughter, and they said that was fine, but just breaking that news and how to handle it, and navigating those waters of trying to read body language of 15-16-year-old kids, and then coming out of that to tell them that, their friend had passed and what happened to him. I had to hold the school of 1000-plus kids together, and at the same time be sensitive enough to do it.

After notifying the close friends in private, Tom went over the intercom at the end of the school day to notify the student population. He sent out an email to staff and families describing the tragedy and communicated the plan for the next couple of days at school. Tom had the emergency response team of the district on site the next morning to help students who were grieving and trying to cope with the situation. At one time he had over 700 requests to go to the funeral, but the site the family had selected was not nearly big enough to house that many people; so, Tom and a group of students collaboratively decided to create posters the students

would sign at lunch with personal messages to the student and family. This was a time-sensitive decision because Tom was trying to be empathetic to the family and the student body, but also tried to encourage education in his building.

Tom claimed the event lasted about a week, but it was physically and emotionally draining. He spent numerous hours counseling students and letting people cry on his shoulder. After the funeral was over, school started to return to normalcy, but many students and staff needed to grieve for an extended period of time. Tom asked one of the counselors to run a grief group for the students once a week, so they could talk about their feelings and get through the incident together.

In the end, this situation was a crucible for Tom because it truly tested his ability to lead and navigate a situation with poise, confidence, empathy, and direction. Tom stated the three most important lessons he learned from the event were how important relationships, collaboration, and securing the floor were to navigating the experience as successfully as possible. Tom did not think the event would have gone as smoothly if he had not been an active principal who knew the students on a personal level. It was easier in his estimation to talk and break the news to people who knew he truly cared about them. In addition, by working with other people and asking what steps they felt were important to the process, Tom was able to come up with a much more thorough plan and was able to be notified of blind spots that he might not have noticed. Lastly, by getting to the student's close friends first, Tom felt he was able to control the reaction and grieving mechanisms in the school to a greater capacity. In the end, he was proud of the staff and students for how they rallied together to support each other during a difficult time. Tom ended our conversation by stating:

That initial crucible prepared me for the job I'm in now. I don't know if I would have been able to do as well of a job navigating the waters of difficult situations, had I not gone through that initial crucible experience. All of the little leadership moments have a big impact and that initial experience prepared me to be a better leader.

Summary

Chapter five included twenty- three stories of “sooner or later” crucibles principals faced during their career. I broke the section into four sub-sections which included (1) student incidents, (2) implementing change, (3) staffing decisions, and (4) dealing with death or tragedy. In each story the principals expressed the need to draw on a variety of leadership skills to navigate the experience successfully. In the end, every principal noted the experience allowed him or her to improve as a leader and feel more confident in his/her ability as a lead principal. The next chapter is an analysis of my study.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I use Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2000) to analyze this study's thirty- four experienced high school principals' stories. I reiterate the key concepts of Mezirow's theory to refresh the reader's memory. I analyze the four types of learning within the transformational learning theory and compare them to the stories told in this study. In addition, I analyzed the stories participants told that resisted their dominant views and forced the participant to engage in critical reflection and risk-taking to emerge from their crucible successfully. This analysis section identifies the types of learning that took place during crucible leadership experiences of high school principals.

Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory

Humans learn throughout adolescence and into adulthood based on the social context in which they grow up, the experiences they have had throughout their lives, and the values that have been taught to them. As a person moves into adulthood, those frames of reference are thought to be "the right way" by the individual, which in turn establishes the person's values, assumptions, and habits. Some refer to this as a person's collective "world view," comprised of many meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind combined.

Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2000) establishes a behavioral framework formed during adolescence that stays with a person into adulthood unless experiencing transformational change. Mezirow (2000) explained the process:

Our values and sense of self are anchored in our frames of reference. They provide us with a sense of stability, coherence, community, and identity. Consequently they are often emotionally charged and strongly defended. Other points of view are judged against the standards set by our points of view. Viewpoints that call our frames of reference into question may be dismissed as distorting, deceptive, ill-intentioned or crazy. Who we are and what we value are closely associated. So questions raised regarding one's values are apt to be viewed as personal attacks. Learning tends to become narrowly defined as efforts to add compatible ideas to elaborate our fixed frames of reference. However, this disposition may be changed through transformational learning. (p. 18)

The transformational learning theory focuses on how people learn to negotiate and act on their purpose, values, feelings, and meaning rather than those from others with whom they associate. This process allows individuals to gain greater control over their lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers (Mezirow, 2000). One of the key assumptions of this theory is that individuals are able to critically reflect on their lives and critique their value system through insightful discourse. The discourse allows a person to hear other meaning perspectives and critically assess his/her own frames of reference. Mezirow referred to this understanding of oneself as "emotional intelligence" or, in other words-maturity, awareness, empathy, and control (2000). As people critically reflect and engage in adult-level discourse, they are able to experience transformations in their learning.

Mezirow has identified four ways in which learning occurs in adulthood: by elaborating existing frames of reference (non-transformative), by learning new frames of reference (transformative), by transforming points of view (transformative), or by transforming habits of mind (transformative) (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000), transformational learning follows a ten-step process:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, guilt, or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

In this study, the amount of learning by principals fluctuated depending on the duration, magnitude, and importance of the event. Some individuals advanced through the entire ten-step process quickly and changed their frame of reference, meaning perspective, and habits of mind. Others battled the sequence for long periods of time before changing, or perhaps never changing an existing framework, despite the opportunities available for transformational learning. Stories about crucible experiences or “distorting dilemmas” started the first phase of the transformational learning process. One way to distinguish the degree to which participants experienced transformational learning involved analyzing stories based on participant movement from upholding and affirming existing frameworks to making radical changes in thought and action.

I analyzed the progression of transformational learning experienced by participants. I first described participants who experienced a “distorting dilemma,” but, in the end, stayed within an existing frame of reference. Next, I described those who “elaborated” on an existing frame, adding new knowledge and skills to an existing framework or mindset. To understand the difference between a “disorienting dilemma” and a true transformation, I next described how participants made more radical changes in thought, and later action. The last group included stories of principals who made significant personal growth, but also were able to affect an entire

school culture or community. This study refers to the last group of stories as transformational leadership.

Elaborating on Existing Frames of Reference

When leaders rely on an existing frame of reference to resolve a difficult situation, they perform their role without much challenge to their beliefs, viewpoints, and actions. Stories told from this perspective reveal the lack of transformational learning because they described no transforming viewpoints or habits of mind (actions) in their stories. However, this does not mean participants never experienced a distorting dilemma – one posing considerable challenge. It just means that in the end, the participants reaffirmed their original beliefs and values, used a similar strategy to resolve the issue, and for the most part remained unchanged by the experience.

I identified 10 out of the 34 stories that fit into the elaborating on existing frames of reference category-where the principals never saw the need to change an existing frame of reference. For example, Chris claimed he “knew how to handle a difficult employee” and justified his position by claiming he “already knew the right course of action.” Chris described this moment: “At that point, I had enough experience that I didn’t get in an argument about it. I just told it like it was. [He knew the right answer without expanding his view, saying]: “Let’s not beat around the bush here.” Chris used an existing frame of reference to make a difficult decision. The experience failed to change his leadership, and instead solidified an existing framework. Likewise, Ben claimed he stuck to his core values, and he resisted the micromanagement of the demanding school board and superintendent. He failed to see how or why others might lack confidence in his ability as a novice principal. He made reference to a few different events in the first few years on the job where he used his “experience and skill set

to guide him.” This reference means Chris’s preconceived viewpoints and frames of reference were reaffirmed by his leadership experiences and no transformational learning took place.

In addition, Keith, Kyle, Harry, Paul, and Chris told stories about student incidents at school that required a strict procedural process to get through the traumatic experience; however, none of these stories provided a change in perspective or habit of mind on how the participant dealt with similar situations moving forward. Each principal spoke about how he critically assessed the situation and might have felt nervous or anxious about the outcome, but none of the principals changed their way of handling that procedure or how they thought the procedure should be dealt with based on what they learned from their experience.

Furthermore, Jane told a story about firing a popular coach that involved elaborating on her existing frames of reference. Jane confirmed she handled the situation with her existing frames of reference when she claimed:

Really this event made me stronger, and I think it really showed the community and my staff that I will fight the fight. I will fight for what I believe is best for kids, and the school. For me personally, my tenacity, my willingness to persist was powerful even though I was dealing with massive amounts of resistance and pressure from external people to rescind my decision. It just made me stronger and it made me wiser as a leader and principal.

Jane’s comments showed she reaffirmed her frame of reference on her ability to lead and how she handled this difficult staffing decision. This experience was difficult for her, but she stayed true to her moral compass and emerged from the experience as a stronger and wiser leader.

Also, Harry and Paul handled deaths in their schools that forced them to follow a procedure and lead with confidence. Harry articulated a five-step process that his district had established that allowed the school and system to work through an emergency, such as a death, successfully. He stated that he “had too much experience with this topic” and “wanted to present at conferences about this five-step process someday.” Harry was confident in his approach and

claimed that he felt that if others followed this process they would be able to get a “win-win” out of the situation that allowed all parties to move through a tragedy as smoothly as possible. These comments assert that Harry had his frames of reference confirmed after the experience he shared. In addition, Paul felt certain about how he handled the murder of one of his students when he stated:

The crisis team came to the high school, and they started going through this policy and I said all of y'all can leave right now because this is not how we're going to manage this moment. I grew up in the deep South. My father was native, my mother was white, and I grew up in an African American community. I know how they handle loss and death, and the way you're trying to manage this will explode and blow up poorly in my face. We're not doing it that way, so you can pack your crap and leave.

By discussing his upbringing and his experiences with a different culture, Paul is proving he is using his existing frames of reference to shape his vision and leadership. He was not introducing transformational learning, instead, he used the information he had learned previously to make his decision. While these experiences were difficult and emotionally taxing, the principals did not change their frames of reference or view points during the experience.

In summary, ten of the thirty-four crucible stories told by principals were non-transformational experiences. That does not mean they were not powerful leadership journeys that forced the principal to lead with confidence, but, in the end, the principals' frames of reference were only strengthened by the dilemma, and they emerged more confident in their own beliefs. A true crucible experience disrupts existing frameworks. Failing to expand perspectives causes rigidity in thinking, and it also creates a closed habit of mind to alternative perspectives. Many in leadership roles experience a challenging moment or event in their careers. However, those who ultimately grow from this experience feel discomfort within an existing frame of reference, and begin to consider expanding frames of reference due to their discomfort.

Learning New Frames of Reference

When a person experiences or learns something that is completely new to them, they develop a new frame of reference in which to view the world. People in this phase of learning rely on their existing frame of reference to assess how this new information agrees or conflicts with their current meaning perspectives, frame of reference, and habits of mind. This type of learning causes a person to experience deep self-reflection and to examine their previous frame of reference.

In my study, none of the participants told a story that fell into this category of learning. In every case that advanced past the elaboration of existing frames of reference, participants moved into either transforming points of view or transforming habits of mind because new knowledge shifted the participants' approach for the future. In both cases the resolution of the distorting dilemma advanced the participants learning beyond a new frame of reference. Nevertheless, a true transformational experience (crucible) distorts a person's mindset and allows the participant to try new ways of solving her/his distorting dilemma. This calls into question their frames of reference and habits of mind. Six stories in my study required principals to experiment with a new way of approaching a particular situation that the principal didn't necessarily agree with, but chose to do anyway.

Transforming Points of View

"Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by 'trying on' another point of view. The more reflective and open we are to the perspective of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 20). Participants who experienced situations that challenged their beliefs, viewpoints, and actions moved into the transforming

points of view phase of the 10 step transformational process. In these stories the participants tried a new philosophy (frame of reference) to resolve their dilemma, but during the process something happened that caused them to revert back to their original frame of reference or continue to act in a particular way half-heartedly. In both cases, the participants learned a valuable lesson, but they did not complete the transformational process because their habit of mind did not change indefinitely. Six stories fell into this category.

In the first story, David experienced role conflict—trying to be both a parent and principal at the same time. Both his wife and the superintendent hoped to influence his ideas and reactions regarding issues involving his daughters. He found it extremely difficult to know how to handle the situation correctly. He found himself agreeing philosophically with both the superintendent, when he was wearing his principal hat; and his wife, when he was wearing his parent hat. As he navigated this crucible experience, David had a few unpleasant interactions with coaches and teachers who worked with his daughters, making it difficult to lead the organization effectively. In the end, David said:

I navigated it by the fact that I had to realize, “You know what? This isn’t the way it works.” At times, I still felt like I couldn’t be a parent. I had to let go, and I had to let the process happen without me. In support of the process, I hoped that the right ending would come. But this was the only way to maintain my job and still be a parent.

David tried different approaches, but never came to a conclusion on the best way [habit of mind] to handle the dual role.

Likewise, David told another story about his superintendent asking him to taint an interview process. David obliged and did as his boss told him. He was trying on a new viewpoint, but was not convinced it was the right approach for him. As he navigated this difficult crucible experience, David felt sick to his stomach. He realized that he had sacrificed his moral imperative to appease his boss. After the experience was over, he vowed never to taint

another interview process again. David's experience transformed his point of view because he did not accept the new frame of reference as a habit of mind that he wanted to keep forever; he merely tried it out.

The next story involved Erin, who ran into several roadblocks as she led a school through diversity training. In this experience, Erin tried to stay ahead of the issues, but always found herself one step behind. She didn't know exactly how to handle this super emotional experience, but kept trying new techniques (view points) to get her point across to staff, students, and community members while working towards her goal. She ran into several obstacles, which caused her to critically reflect on her goals and leadership approach. She tried on numerous habits of mind (new actions) to see if they worked, but she never fully committed to a strategy. After the crucible had passed, she was not certain what the most effective approach would have been, but knew she gave it her best.

Tom was a new principal when his superintendent and school board approached him to increase the rigor of the grading scale. The school board and superintendent instructed Tom to tighten the grading scale, making it more difficult for students to get good grades. Tom did not philosophically believe in this initiative, but as a new principal he wanted to support the district's vision and lead the charge with confidence. As the initiative was being implemented, Tom had second thoughts about the decision and regretted making the change. He tried on someone else's vision, but never bought into the plan. He ended up reverting back to the original grading scale by the end of the year, but learned a valuable lesson about following his intuition and moral compass.

In addition, Kyle tried to implement a change to his building's bell schedule. He initially had the buy-in from the school board, superintendent, staff, and students, but after two years he

started to lose their support. He believed in the change and his habit of mind was convinced it was the right decision. As he started to survey more and more stakeholders, he realized that what is good for the goose is not always what is good for the gander. Kyle had made his way through the entire ten step transformational learning process, but he reverted back to the transforming viewpoint stage as he saw his vision unravel. This crucible experience was one of the longer ones as it took three years to complete.

Likewise, David experienced a longer crucible experience as he tried to “get rid” of a tenured teacher who “was not fit to be educating kids.” David spent multiple years trying to embrace different viewpoints that he heard from students, staff, and district personal that told him the teacher “was fine,” but he continued to experience a different viewpoint in his school. David moved on to a new job before he could get fully through this crucible experience, but his viewpoint and habit of mind changed multiple times throughout the two and a half years working with this teacher.

In total, five principals told stories that led them to try on new viewpoints during a crucible. This experience forced them to critically reflect on their own assumptions and dialogue with other people to come to an appropriate decision. Through critical discourse and reflection, their habit of mind was altered, but did not change completely. The next section includes principals telling stories of going through the entire ten-step transformational learning process with their habits of mind changing indefinitely.

Transforming Habits of Mind

Transformational learning involves completely changing the way a person analyzes and reacts to a situation. Mezirow (2000) described the magnitude of a transformational experience when he stated, “Transformations in habit of mind may be epochal, a sudden, dramatic,

reorienting insight, or incremental, involving a progressive series of transformation in habit of mind” (p. 21). A mindful, transformative learning experience requires the learner to make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insights. In other words, life is not only seen differently from a new perspective, it is also lived from that new perspective. Mezirow (2000) stated this can happen through objective and subjective reframing. While “objective reframing involves critical reflection on assumptions of others encountered in a narrative or in task-oriented problem solving, as in ‘action learning’” (p. 23), subjective reframing includes critical self-reflection of one’s own assumptions. In my study, 18 of the 34 stories told involved a transformational experience that altered the person’s habit of mind indefinitely.

In both chapters, New Principal Problems and Sooner or Later Principal Problems, participants related experiencing a distorting dilemma that brought them through the entire transformational learning process. Some of the participants had not even realized how big of an impact the incident had on their leadership until they told the story, but others knew for years it had shaped their ongoing leadership journey. The fact that the participants could articulate the changes (habits of mind) that resulted in their learning and leadership from the crucible experience confirmed they had completed the ten-step transformational learning process. I begin with the four stories told in the New Principals chapter.

Nate was presented with a difficult racially charged leadership experience that made him examine who he was, where he came from, and what he stood for as a building principal. Nate engaged in discourse with relatives and colleagues before deciding to try a few different actions and see where they took him. As Nate navigated the crucible, he began to realize the value of providing “power to, instead of over powering” his staff. Nate learned the value of asking questions and guiding people instead of providing them directives to follow. Utilizing this new

technique proved to be effective for Nate and increased his confidence in motivating stakeholders. Nate claimed he still utilizes this technique to this day in his practice.

Likewise, Tyler was a brand new principal, and, while qualified, felt he was not the right fit for the job. Tyler found himself thinking ‘everybody here is nuts.’ But, what he was really thinking was ‘no one else here thinks like me’. This really bothered him until he started learning about personal learning styles. As Tyler began to lead his new school, he learned a new frame of reference on how to approach leadership. He began learning how his employees preferred to work and adjusted to their styles. He got the “the right people on the right seats of the bus” and started to gain more confidence. This transformational experience involved both objective and subjective reframing and took about one year to complete.

In addition, Tyler shared how he learned to be vulnerable as a principal. He told a story about trying to motivate staff with the “climb the mountain speech” two years in a row. The first year it was successful, but the second year people were angry and did not react well to his message. Tyler spent two nights critically reflecting on the experience and trying to determine what he had done wrong. What he failed to realize is his staff needed a different message at that time. Tyler said that, “They needed to mourn and hurt for a little while.” The next day he called a staff meeting and cried while he apologized to them. Tyler had never cried in front of his staff and this allowed people to see him differently as a leader. It allowed him to be more transparent and vulnerable. This experience sparked a change in how Tyler led his staff and changed his mindset and actions as the lead principal.

Moreover, Mike told a story about his difficult experience with the school board and superintendent who asked him to carry out numerous unethical requests. Mike spoke about how he did not feel comfortable with the wishes of his superiors and the moral dilemma he faced.

The experience shaped him as a leader because he had to listen, digest, and dialogue with his one trusted colleague about what actions he should take to protect his job and integrity. The lesson learned was that he would not compromise his moral compass for other people's benefit. He experienced this crucible and legal battle for over two years, which strengthened his habit of mind to lead.

Fourteen out of the eighteen transformational stories came from the Sooner or Later Principal Problems chapter, where participants told stories about student incidents, implementing change, staffing decisions, and death/tragedy. To start, Keith discussed a crucible that involved an equal access lawsuit that made national news. Keith claimed he "had many sleepless nights" contemplating his decision and actions. Keith never thought that providing student's access to the intercom system and letting them publicize their student group could have such negative implications. He learned a new frame of reference through the experience and changed his approach to providing students access at his school. The entire experience, including a lawsuit, was not settled for over a year and a half proving to be a long drawn out crucible experience.

Similarly, Steve told a story that left him leading an important school event without any support from his staff. This event caused Steve to critically reflect on his actions, viewpoints, and assumptions while trying to regain the trust and support of his staff. Steve was disappointed, frustrated, and saddened by the experience, but he listened to his staff's concerns and talked through the important details. Steve modified his approach (habit of mind) moving forward to ensure collaboration and commitment from all stakeholders. Steve recognized "that it all happened fast" and realized the quickness of the crucible might have caused him to make uninformed decisions that had a greater impact than he expected.

In addition, Nate deescalated a situation when a student brought a loaded gun to school. Nate moved through the ten-step transformational process in a quick and deliberate manner. He nervously started the crucible experience and was unsure of what he should do; however through speaking with the police, using his prior knowledge about the student, and reflecting on possible outcomes, he came to an effective solution. Nate used his prior frames of reference to guide him throughout the process but was exposed also to a new frame of reference. Nate leveraged his relationships with students and staff to distract the student and lure him down to his office where the police were waiting to arrest him. Nate learned leadership lessons on chain of command, communication, and empathy during his quick crucible.

After taking over a brand new high school, Tyler realized the culture was negative. In order to get a hold of the culture Tyler had small group conversations with every student and staff member in the building and relocated his desk to the middle of the troubled hallway. Tyler's frame of reference shifted after this experience because he had to put himself completely out there as a leader. He was extremely vulnerable and at times alone on his mission, but he kept forging ahead until the culture had returned to a positive environment. His frame of reference changed from this experience because for the first time he realized what it meant to be the leader of the high school and not just a manager. He also realized how important it was for people to "see, hear, feel, and smell" his message. His leadership needed to "stink up the room," until everyone was on the same page.

Betty described a story about implementing a new structure for her school's instructional leadership team. Betty's crucible started when she attended a conference that taught her the importance of clear leadership. Betty spoke to district level employees and her colleagues about ways she could implement this at her site. She reflected on the possible outcomes before she

acted. As she implemented the change, she ran into a number of speed bumps along the way. In the end, Betty created a vision of “we and not me.” She claimed this crucible taught her how to “see around corners and play chess” as a building leader.

In the next story, Paul described his quest to institute new course offerings at his high school. Paul explained his crucible:

people became so deeply rooted in the known, that they were afraid to look at the unknown, even if the unknown was better, even if the unknown engaged and involved few risks, they were still afraid to leave the certainty of that moment that they have in time that seemed to work for them.

By engaging in conversations with people and reflecting on the teachers’ viewpoints, Paul was able to implement a positive change. Paul’s frame of reference was altered because he didn’t think he had to explain and provide as many details as he did to make a change. It was a learning lesson that proved to be valuable for the rest of his career.

Furthermore, Grant told a story about implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) that proved to be a big challenge. The crucible began when he started having conversations with his staff about collaboration and improvement. When he decided he wanted to implement PLCs on a full scale basis in the school, he received tremendous pushback from the veteran teachers. This power struggle was difficult for Grant to navigate and forced him to engage in deep conversations about purpose, trust, and improvement. At different times throughout this three- year experience, Grant had different reactions. Sometimes he felt like he was taking one step forward and then two steps backward with specific departments. He emerged from the crucible a changed leader because he was forced to embrace multiple perspectives, adapt his vision to fit the teacher’s needs, and trust others to get the job done; all of which were difficult for Grant.

Chris discussed the implementation of the no substitute rule. Chris never thought this was a possibility until one of his teacher leaders brought the idea to his attention to save money. Chris listened and processed the idea for a while and discussed the possible blind spots with his administrative team. Once he was convinced the idea could work, he began to roll it out to his staff and school board. Chris had his frame of reference changed twice in this crucible. First, when he learned about this idea and began to think it could work, and then when he implemented the idea and it proved to be successful. Chris believed the “no substitute” rule would be a common practice around the state of Minnesota in the near future.

Moreover, Tyler shifted his staff’s mindset at a staff meeting. Tyler discussed the problem he was having at staff meetings with his wife and colleagues before taking action. At the staff meeting, he demanded the people’s attention and told them point blank that how they were acting was not acceptable and it needed to change immediately. He was trying a new approach to get his staff’s attention. When the approach to the staff’s behavior was corrected, Tyler embraced this new mindset within his leadership approach and thus his habit of mind was changed.

Additionally, Rob discussed the learning process he had gone through internally as a lead principal throughout his long career. Rob identified this long drawn out process as one crucible after another to continually push him to get better. Rob noted as society changed a principal’s strategy also needed to shift, “When external forces change the way in which you must operate a building, the way in which leadership takes place must also change.” These crucibles have shifted Rob’s habit of mind numerous times. Rob claimed a principal’s success “ultimately comes back to, how big of a learner you are and how big of a collaborator you are.”

Kyle allowed four probationary teachers to get to their third year in their probationary process before he decided to pink slip them. After this experience he felt terrible and reflected with his administrative team. They decided they never wanted to feel responsible again for a probationary teacher failing that long into the process. They created a new teacher program and took strategic steps to make sure all of the new teachers were comfortable. The initial crucible not only affected the four teachers, it also affected the trust and commitment level of the other staff members. This event triggered a habit of mind shift for Kyle because it took deep reflection, dialogue, and action to change his leadership philosophy with this issue.

Likewise, Jane managed a hostile staff after a much respected teacher decided to quit midway through the year. This event was a crucible for Jane because she felt like her entire staff was against her. She had to stand her ground, change her approach to leadership, and in her words “survive” the rest of the year. During the process she discussed leadership tactics and ideas with teachers and administrators she could trust, allowing her to emerge from the event a stronger leader.

Kyle took over a school that dealt with two students being killed during a school shooting. This experience was a long crucible for Kyle because he had never encountered leading a school after an event of this magnitude. Kyle learned how to listen more and make decisions collaboratively. In the past he did not operate like this as a leader and tried to move from point A to point B as quickly as possible, but this crucible caused him to slow down, reflect, ask questions, and embrace multiple opinions. This habit of mind shift is something he has carried with him ever since this crucible.

Lastly, Tom discussed the tragic student death he had to manage and the impact it had on his leadership. The experience was traumatic for him because of the close relationship many

staff members and students had with this well liked young man who passed away. Tom cried for the first time and showed vulnerability to his staff during this crucible. He tried different approaches for the school day and grieving. The process as a whole changed the way he dealt with and handled loss of life in his building.

Eighteen stories made it through Mezirow's ten-step transformational learning process, but five of these stories and one from the elaborating on existing frames of reference section stood out to be different. These six stories proved not only to have a tremendous impact on the participant, but also influenced a school or community; this process of moving from individual learning to leading a school or community constitutes transformational leadership.

Transformational Leadership through Critical Reflection, Dialogue, and Risk Taking

After reviewing the stories told by participants, six stories stood out to be different from the rest. The participants in these stories resisted their prior understanding, action, and belief on how to handle a situation; and through critical reflection, dialogue, and risk taking tried a new approach allowing them to emerge from the experience successfully while having a positive impact on their school and/or community. These participants not only learned during the crucible, they led. All of these participants candidly explained they understood the magnitude of their situation and admitted they knew the action they took was risky because it was not the common or recommended way to handle the situation. These stories showed the leaders standing up for what they believed in and navigating the situation with caution, but confidence. This section describes the process the participants went through to emerge from the experience successfully.

Out of the six stories that fit into this category, only one story emerged that was not a transformational experience. Paul's story was about standing up to the district office when

handling a student murder. He based his response on an existing frame of reference and faced heavy resistance from his school district, staff, and parents. Instead of following along with the district's standard operating procedure, Paul told the crisis response team to "leave the school and I'm going to handle this my way." District personnel did not appreciate this approach and pushed back, but Paul insisted that this was "[his] decision." Paul used his prior knowledge from growing up in the South and worked directly with the family involved in the tragedy to determine how the situation would be handled in the school. Paul realized the family wanted to handle the situation in an unconventional way, and he wanted to honor that request. Many teachers, community members, and district employees questioned Paul throughout the process and did not appreciate that he was handling this situation "differently than others." The naysayers questioned Paul's judgment, his favoritism, cultural competency, and his ability to lead. Throughout the process Paul did not waver. He knew in his heart that the way he was handling the situation was right, and if people could not see that, then he did not care. After the situation was over, Paul had to rationalize his approach to the district and some people still did not approve. However, Paul felt this experience proved that sometimes in the face of adversity you must stand up for what you believe in and do what you feel is right regardless of the consequences. Paul claimed this was one of the best leadership lessons he received throughout his career and acknowledged the school district changed their policy on how to handle student death after this incident.

Nate described a transformational experience when one of his teachers used racially charged curriculum in his classroom. Paul also explained the steps he took to resolve the situation successfully. Nate knew the conventional way to handle the situation was to get human resources involved and make sure the teacher union knew about this teacher's curriculum. Nate

understood if he handled it this way the teacher would be disciplined and Nate would look like a manager, not a leader. And, so, through discourse with his family members and critical reflection, Nate decided to take a different more risky approach. He went into the classroom and asked the teacher if he could lead a discussion around the curriculum. Nate's approach was risky because students and parents had already notified the superintendent about this teacher's curriculum. Nate could have been accused of promoting the decision instead of making sure it was removed from the class. When the situation was over, Nate was able to allow the teacher to listen to student perspective and come to the realization the curriculum was offensive and should not be taught in that fashion. The next day, the teacher thanked Nate for making him open his eyes without getting him fired. Nate viewed the situation as a win-win because the curriculum was removed from the classroom, the students and parents knew he addressed the issue, and the teacher still respected and valued him as his principal. Nate concluded that his decision to handle the crucible this way instead of operating out of the dominate norm allowed him to grow as a leader, and transformed his thought process on how situations needed to be addressed. In addition, the teachers in the building had a new found respect for Nate as a leader.

Mike told a story about not following the directions of his school board, which resulted in the school board trying to get him fired, eventually suing him. While Mike used his moral compass to guide him throughout this experience, he realized not following the requests of the school board could jeopardize his job and career. He spoke to his closest friends and reflected throughout the experience to determine the validity of his decision. When it came time for action, Mike decided to blaze his own trail. Mike filed a counter lawsuit and began to battle the superintendent and school board to keep his job. Through litigation, Mike emerged victorious and vindicated from the accusations of the school district. It was more important to Mike to

remain ethical than it was for him to keep his job. Lucky for him, he was able to do both. Mike proved that through resisting peer pressure and his boss's directives he could still emerge from this experience a stronger and more confident leader with a better understanding of politics in education.

Tyler changed the school culture in a month. He spoke to the unconventional approaches he took to regain the student and staff buy-in. He moved his desk to the middle of the hallway, was constantly talking to every student and staff member in the school, and forced people to take a side "with us" or "against us." Tyler's swift action and blunt approach were not things he learned in his preparation program and they required him to resist large groups of students and staff who were not "buying into" the cultural norms. He had to make them "see him, believe him, and know he would not ever back down" from this issue. As time went on and Tyler was able to see a shift in the buildings culture, he knew he had made a good decision, but during the experience he knew the decisions he made would either work or cause the school to go up in flames. Luckily for him, he emerged from the experience successfully and the school regained its positive culture.

Chris implemented a "no substitute" procedure met with heavy resistance from staff, community members, the Minnesota Department of Education, and the school board. Chris was forced to defend his plan on the radio, in the newspaper, and in board meetings, while trying to get buy-in from his teaching community. Chris knew the decision would be controversial because he wasn't familiar with any other school district utilizing this practice, but he knew it would be a cost-effective way to save money and still provide a similar educational experience for the students. Throughout the experience, Chris leaned on a few staff members who encouraged him not to back down and to "stay the course." As time went on, the naysayers

started to dwindle, but if Chris had not stood up for his beliefs and had continued to operate as status quo, he never would have been able to recognize all of the building improvements with the money that he saved. By reflecting, using critical discourse with his staff, and taking a risk, Chris was able to emerge victorious from this crucible.

The last story came from Tyler. In this story, Tyler described his school staff not attending staff meetings on time and being rude to the presenters. One day, after Tyler watched how the staff treated a guest speaker, he snapped in front of the entire staff. He called people out for their behavior. He expressed the importance of professionalism and demanded the behavior change immediately. This was not an orchestrated decision or move on his part, but a plea for engagement and compliance. Tyler reflected on this decision with one of his administrators before going for it. This situation was risky because the staff could have turned on him, but instead they complied and began to change their behavior at staff meetings. By asserting his dominance and following his gut, Tyler was able to build rapport with his staff and transform their habits of mind about staff meetings.

In all six of the stories shared in this section, principals faced resistance in their approach to leadership. They had to examine their own assumptions, beliefs, and habits of mind about the situation and try something unconventional to get the job done well. In all of these stories principals used an approach not taught to them in their preparation programs; they generated an approach on their own. All of the stories required the participant to engage in critical reflection, dialogue, and take a risk to emerge from the crucible successfully. The difference between these stories and the other 28 stories shared in this study is the magnitude of impact the experience had on the individual, school and community. The risk was greater, but the reward was much higher

as well. By engaging in the difficult work, these principals displayed learning, in addition to transformational leadership.

Summary

In this chapter, I categorized 34 stories told by experienced high school principals based on the type of learning experienced throughout a participant's crucible experience. Ten of the stories merely elaborated on an already existing frame of reference for the principal. I did not identify any stories as only learning new frames of reference. In hindsight this was not too surprising because for an incident to truly be a crucible it would have been jarring or slightly traumatic. By simply learning something new this would not necessarily be jarring or traumatic therefore I was not surprised no stories fell into this category. Furthermore, I identified six of the 34 stories as transforming points of view where the participants told a story about learning a new frame of reference, "trying it on," but then shifting back to their previous belief after the incident concluded. The most represented section was transforming habits of mind. I identified 18 out of the 34 stories as moving all the way through the ten-step transformational learning process. All of these participants expressed critical reflection as well as engaged in discourse to come to a transformed habit of mind. The process of the transformational learning experience allowed the participants to examine their assumptions, values, and beliefs in their attempt to emerge as stronger leaders.

Within the 34 stories told, I identified six as being transformational leadership experiences. The participants had to go against their prior knowledge, general assumptions, and cultural understandings to dig deeper and find the correct approach that was new and potentially risky for their career. These leaders provided insightful recognition of their catalyst experiences and attributed the ability to stand up for what they believed in and resist the dominant norm as

essential in emerging from their crucible successfully. Participants, engaged in transformational leadership, displayed perseverance, grit, determination and vision when their colleagues or bosses tried to talk them out of their chosen course of action. These participants exposed the importance of leading through a crucible experience.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECCOMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I summarize the research findings of this study. I then discuss implications for practice, such as how this information could be used by aspiring principals, current practicing principals and in professional development opportunities. Next, I discuss the limitations of this research and suggest possible areas for further research on crucible leadership experiences. I conclude with some personal thoughts on the power of strong professional networks and the importance of constantly improving and learning.

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify how high school principals experience and make meaning from “crucible” leadership experiences. This study used the following three sub-questions to further define my inquiry: (1) What types of crucible experiences represented a significant leadership challenge?; (2) How do participants describe the experience, and its effects on their leadership?; and (3) How do crucible experiences affect principal perceptions and changes in their leadership, particularly concerning their interactions and work with members of the school and community?

From 17 personal interviews with participants who have served as lead high school principals for five or more years, this study garnered 34 insightful crucible stories. These stories varied in duration, impact, and lessons learned, but all proved to be valuable lessons learned from the participant’s perspective. Analysis of the data showed all of the stories fell into one of two distinct categories: New Principal Problems or Sooner or Later Principal Problems. Stories in the New Principal Problems category addressed incidents involving either establishing leadership in a new building or dealing with a school board and superintendent. Stories in the Sooner or Later Principal Problems category described events involving student incidents, implementing change, staffing decisions, or death and tragedy.

Upon further analysis, I used Mezirow's transformational learning theory (2008) to identify the magnitude of learning taking place within each one of the stories told. Ten of the stories told by participants merely elaborated on an existing frame of reference; zero stories were identified as learning a new frame of reference; six stories transformed the participant's point of view; and the remaining 18 stories told were transformational in nature. The transformational stories required the participant to engage in personal reflection and dialogue to emerge from the experience successful and more confident in their leadership ability.

Out of the 34 stories described and analyzed, six proved to be different. In these stories participants not only experienced personal and professional growth through transformational learning, but also demonstrated qualities of transformational leadership, sparking positive change in their school or community. Their actions led to position change within themselves and others.

All participants said they learned from their crucible leadership experience – the experience made them wiser and more confident in their leadership ability. Principals who experienced Mezirow's entire ten-step transformational learning process used critical reflection, engaged in dialogue, took risks, and felt passionate about getting better at their job. The participants learned, but also led, through their crucible experience by not only surviving the experience, but also finding a way for everyone to win in the process. This distinction involved their focus on others, and their ability to sponsor growth of self and others.

Leadership gets tested during adverse situations. For some of these participants their crucible experience came early in their career, while others encountered the crucible test later in their careers. The point is, every single one of the participants experienced at least one crucible throughout his/her career. It is not a matter of "if" leaders encounter a crucible experience, but a matter of "when" the experience will take place during their career. The findings in this study

may inform educational leaders to better prepare themselves and other principals for a more successful career.

Implications

The results of this study concerning the crucible leadership experiences of high school principals may be beneficial for several groups of educators. Certainly aspiring principals who are seeking the knowledge and wisdom to be successful as a principal may find these stories and the advice provided useful. Current principals who may have already experienced a crucible or two might utilize this process to be more reflective in their practice and share their experiences with others as a teaching and learning method. While professional development is relatively scarce for principals, the process of communicating failures could be extremely useful in the personal development of principals both new and experienced.

Aspiring Principals

There is great value in learning from experienced individuals. Aspiring principals could read this study to find out what crucibles they might encounter throughout their career and reflect on how they would handle a similar situation. By foreseeing potential future problems, principals can use foresight to take actions to negate those issues in a proactive, instead of reactive manner. By having a clear understanding of the common issues they will encounter during their careers, aspiring principals might be more confident in their abilities to lead a school and reduce their level of stress in the first few years on the job. This might cause more principals to remain in their jobs without leaving for a different position. Retaining more effective principals could have a great impact on school culture and student achievement.

In addition, engaging in the process of asking veteran principals about their crucible experiences could be extremely beneficial for aspiring principals. Meaningful one-on-one

conversations that require a person to be reflective, strategic, and articulate could provide aspiring principals with a stronger professional network and more tools, tips, and tricks to navigate their future leadership positions.

Likewise, understanding the importance of strategic risk taking could be beneficial to aspiring principals. While most of the material learned in a preparation program will benefit a new principal, there are still some ethical decisions a person will need to make that cannot and will not be taught to the person. By reading this study and engaging in conversations with principals, aspiring educational leaders could learn how to navigate those difficult situations to emerge stronger and more confident in their decisions. This study could also benefit principal preparation programs as they continue to evolve with the time.

Professional Preparation Programs – Emphasize Learning from Failure and Setbacks

The framework used in this study to conduct interviews and ask open ended questions about a principal's greatest challenges, setbacks, and failures as a leader may be useful in a variety of principal preparation and development programs. For example, students might use the protocol developed in this study to conduct a confidential and informal interview with a principal, an IRB may be obtained by professors covering the work of the class. The students might ask the same questions presented in this study or add new ones. This may increase their overall understanding of how learning from difficult experiences shapes leaders philosophies and actions.

It may be useful to teach adult learning theory in principal preparation programs to encourage principals to utilize the techniques that create meaningful professional development for staff. By increasing staff engagement principals may see increased student achievement and

staff performance. This study could also benefit professional associations principals belong to as they promote continuous learning and development.

Professional Associations – Supporting Continuous Professional Development

Current principals could use this study to continue to sharpen their leadership ability and prepare for what is around the next corner. By reading and staying informed about what issues other principals are experiencing, individuals should be better prepared to take on the challenges of the future in their own school system. Furthermore, the advice participants shared in this study could resonate with current principals, causing them to reflect on their current actions and consider alternative ways to manage an issue in their school. Engaging in professional conversations with colleagues fosters a culture of sharing and learning from practice and failure. This may foster strong relationships, and support the next time the principals experience a difficult situation. This reduces isolation, and supports a team approach. This study may benefit groups of people by using the framework of the study for principal professional development.

Professional Development

In addition, principals could engage in PLCs and discuss their greatest challenges and leadership lessons. This requires a group of people committing time and effort in a vulnerable state to promote learning and strengthen relationships. Furthermore, principals might also share their crucible experiences at conferences, and encourage others to reflect about their greatest challenge as a leader. Promoting critical reflection, dialogue, and risk taking encourages learning. Lastly, principals might create podcasts, articles, and serve on principal panels to discuss and focus dialogue on crucible experiences. The more open principals are about sharing their experiences, the more learning available to others.

In a profession where people make difficult choices and decisions on a regular basis, there are bound to be failures and missteps. As educators we should embrace failure as an opportunity to learn and promote the knowledge learned during those experiences instead of brushing it under the rug. This might reduce the amount of pain and agony experienced by other professionals as they encounter difficult situations and learn from them.

Limitations of the Research

This study was limited by several factors. To begin, all of the 17 participants were serving in schools thirty minutes from a large urban area. Two out of the 17 participants were female and only one participant identified with a race other than White. Because of the great diversity of school districts and leaders throughout the United States, a broader demographic of gender, ethnicity, age, and geographical location would expand the scope of this study.

Furthermore, the study was limited to participants with five plus years of experience as a lead high school principal near a large urban area, which reduced the amount of participants who were eligible to participate. By interviewing newer principals with one to five years of experience the study might be expanded and reach a broader audience.

In addition, all of the data was collected in June, July, and August, which is when students are not in session. By spreading the interviews out over the course of the school year, participants might have been able to recall stories with greater detail and insight. Moreover, I had a professional relationship with a few of the participants and some of the participants were complete strangers. This could have impacted the participants' trust and vulnerability to share difficult experiences openly and honestly. Also, because I asked participants to recall their own experiences, there is a possibility they embellished their stories or failed to recall or present the "facts" as accurately as possible. I balanced listening for the "narrative truth," while maintaining

some degree of objectivity in reviewing the data. This may have skewed the data and resulted in the personal biases of the researcher affecting the findings. Finally, despite my best efforts to be aware and reduce my biases as a teacher, coach, and assistant principal it is possible my biases and experiences limited the analysis and findings of the study.

Recommendations for Further Research

The literature on principal experiences needs expansion. Given the lack of research in this area, my intention for pursuing this topic of study was not only to provide data regarding crucible experiences of high school principals, but also to establish a basic methodological template for researching and analyzing crucible leadership experiences. Most often the principles of adult learning theory get ignored in literature about “effective principals.” More research is needed on crucible leadership experiences of principals and how they have navigated those experiences in school systems. In addition, this model of learning from experience using collegial conversations might be used in other professional sectors. Too often we concentrate on “how to do things right,” instead of learning how to learn.

I recommend future research expand the scope of my original study. By interviewing a larger number of high school principal participants from a variety of geographical locations, races, genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the data would be more substantive, and increase the reliability of my study. In addition, future research might include studies of elementary and middle school principals to see if principals share similar dilemmas or approaches in addressing those experiences. Likewise, it would be interesting to interview principals who left the profession or moved on to assistant superintendent or superintendent positions. More studies of principal problems, and the lessons learned may open up new areas of understanding regarding what it means to be an effective principal. This model of engaging in

critical reflection around crucible leadership experiences may prove useful for people in other sectors outside of education, such as business or non-profit organizations. It would be interesting to find out if leaders in different professional sectors experience similar leadership challenges, and if they approach those situations with the same mindset.

Closing Thoughts

Going through the process of completing a dissertation on crucible leadership experiences of high school principals has been informative and personally rewarding. This study has solidified the importance of maintaining a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and creating a large professional network. Maintaining a growth mindset throughout a career requires individuals to engage in meaningful conversations to critically assess their values, beliefs, and actions. By engaging in these conversations, professionals are constantly reevaluating their points of view and habits of mind as they grow their leadership capacity. In addition, building a strong network of professionals who encounter similar experiences during their career may be extremely useful. Good leadership is pivotal in times of crisis and being able to manage those crucibles effectively by engaging in critical reflection, dialogue, and risk taking may be what separates the good from the great leaders. By utilizing a growth mindset and a strong professional network, principals will be better prepared to take on the demands of this important leadership position.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Form

Message from Sarah Muenster-Blakley:

Date: June 13, 2016

To: Gregory Martin

From: Sarah Muenster-Blakley, Institutional Review Board

Project Title: [873483-1] A Phenomenology Study of High School Principals' Crucible Leadership Experiences

Reference: New Project

Action: Project Approved

Approval Date: June 13, 2016

Expiration: June 12, 2017

Dear Greg:

I have read your protocol and approved your project as reflected in the modifications that you submitted. Please note that all research conducted in connection with this project title must be done in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and assurance that the project is understood by the participants and their signing of the approved consent form. The informed consent process must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between you and your research participants. Federal law requires that each person participating in this study receive a copy of the consent form. All research records relating to participant consent must be retained for a minimum of three years after completion of the project.

Amendments or changes to the procedures approved by the IRB must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to your making changes to your research study. No changes may be made without IRB approval except to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant.

Any unanticipated problems involving risks or harm to project participants or others must be reported to the IRB within one business day of the Principal Investigator's knowledge of the problem. Any non-compliance issues or complaints relating to the project must be reported immediately.

Approval to work with human subjects in connection with this project will expire on June 12, 2017. This project requires continuing review on an annual basis. Documentation for continuing

review must be received at least two weeks prior to the expiration date of June 12, 2017.

Please direct questions at any time to Sarah Muenster-Blakley at (651) 962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu. I wish you success with your project!

Sincerely,

Sarah Muenster-Blakley, M.A.
Director, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B: Email Sent to Potential Participants

Dear Blank,

Please consider participating in a study that I am conducting on Crucible Leadership Experiences of High School Principals.

In order to conduct this research, I am in the process of recruiting between 10 and 15 current or former secondary school principals who have successfully completed five or more years of principal leadership.

By participating in this study, you will help identify difficult experiences novice and aspiring principals can consider when entering the profession of educational administration. Your stories will shine light on the knowledge and wisdom you have gained from your experiences.

I fully appreciate the amount of work you do as principal, so I will try to limit my impact upon your time. Participants will be asked to engage in one 60-90 minute audio recorded interview where they will explain experiences they have encountered as a principal that have tested their ability to lead. I will ask participants to explain the learning process that took place (beginning/during/after) and the skills they needed or wished they had to get through their crucible event.

I have attached an Invitation to Participate, which fully explains the study and your potential role in it, and a document called "Informed Consent" - both of which I hope you'll read.

If you are willing to participate in this study, simply respond to this email with "I am interested" and I will work with you to arrange a time and date to conduct the interview at a location of your choice.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Greg Martin

Doctoral Candidate, University of St. Thomas

Attachments: Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Research Project

Dear Educational Leader,

Please accept this invitation to participate in a research project entitled Crucible Leadership Experiences of High School Principals. This research study is being completed for the partial fulfillment of the requirements of obtaining a Doctorate of Education in Leadership through the University of St. Thomas.

In order to conduct this research, I am in the process of recruiting 10 to 15 current or former secondary school principals who have successfully completed five or more years of principal leadership.

By participating in this study, you will help identify difficult experiences novice and aspiring principals can consider when entering the profession of educational administration. Your stories will shine light on the knowledge and wisdom you have gained from your experiences.

Participants will be asked to engage in one 60-90 minute audio recorded interview where they will explain experiences they have encountered as a principal that have tested their ability to lead. I will ask participants to explain the learning process that took place (beginning/during/after) and the skills they needed or wished they had to get through the crucible event.

Crucible is defined as a “trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forces a leader to question their leadership and what matters to them. It requires a leader to examine their values, question their assumptions, and hone their judgment. Invariably, the leader may emerge from a crucible event stronger and more confident in their purpose—changed in some fundamental way” (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p. 4).

As this study is completely voluntary, you will be free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. I have attached a letter of informed consent to this invitation. If you are willing to consider participating in this study, please review the document describing the study and your role in it. We will review this document on the day of your interview before we begin.

In addition to your participation, I would appreciate your help to identify others with an interest in this research study; please forward this e-mail to any colleagues whom you feel are qualified to share their insights and experiences.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

Greg Martin

Gregory.martin2010@gmail.com

(763)-639-8656

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Greg Martin
Doctoral Candidate, University of St. Thomas

Appendix D: Letter of Consent**CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS***Crucible Leadership Experiences of High School Principals*
873483-1

I am conducting a pilot study about how high school principals experience and learn from "crucible" leadership experiences. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you have five or more years as a high school principal in the metro area of Minnesota. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Gregory Martin, Dr. Sarah Noonan, and The Department of Leadership, Policy and Administration at The University of St Thomas.

Background Information:

The purpose of my study is to identify the crucible leadership challenges experienced by seasoned principals, and the way they navigated these challenges to emerge a stronger leader. Principals need to be well-trained and understand the leadership situations, and not just the managerial situations they will encounter throughout their careers. By identifying the experiences and leadership skills necessary to thrive in the principal position, my hope is novice principals will be better prepared to have an immediate impact in their positions.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 60-90 minute audio recorded interview where you will explain experiences you have encountered as a principal that have tested your ability to lead. I will ask you to explain the learning process that took place (beginning/during/after) and the skills you needed or wish you had to get you through the critical event.

Risks of Being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks, but there is an outside chance you may experience one of the following three risks. First, it may require you to recall traumatic or stressful events about your past. Second, it may require you to share sensitive stories of your past leadership experiences. Third, it may cause you to feel embarrassed or vulnerable.

In order to safeguard the participants against these risks, I will establish a trusting relationship with the participants. I will be sure to ensure privacy of my participant's stories by changing the name of schools and participants. I will also pause if there is emotional distress during the interviews, and provide the UST number for counseling services (651) 962-6780.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for the participants.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential in a locked filing cabinet. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include recordings, transcripts, and hand written notes. I will keep the data obtained during the interview for three years in the locked filing cabinet and then delete and shred the information. During the data collection process I will be the sole person to access the data.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until September 1, 2016. You are also free to skip any questions or withdraw data from the interview at any time.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Greg Martin. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (763)-639-8656. You may also contact my instructor, Dr. Sarah Noonan at (651)-962-4897. The University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board can be reached at (651)-962-6035 with any questions or concerns. The University of St. Thomas Counseling Department can be accessed at (651) 962-6780.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I consent to allowing this interview to be recorded.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Instructor

Date

Appendix E: Participant Background Information

| Names (All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes) | Race | Gender | Years in Education | Years as a Principal | Highest level of Education |
|---|-------------|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Grant | White | Male | 18 | 9 (2 as an AP) | Ed.D. + Superintendent License |
| Keith | White | Male | 33 | 26 (2.5 as an AP) | Masters + 57 (ABD) |
| Kyle | White | Male | 29 | 19 | Masters + 60 (ABD) |
| Ben | White | Male | 40 | 17 (3 as an AP) | Ed.S. +30 |
| Jane | Black | Female | 16 | 6 (1 year as an AP) | Ed.S. + 57 (ABD) |
| Mike | White | Male | 23 | 17 | Ed.S. + 10 |
| Chris | White | Male | 21 | 15 (4 years as an AP) | Masters + 60 |
| Steve | White | Male | 33 | 28 (8 years as an AP/Dean) | Ph.D. + Superintendent License |
| Harry | White | Male | 36 | 26 (2 years as an AP) | Masters + principal license |
| Tom | White | Male | 34.5 | 9 | Masters + principal license |
| Rob | White | Male | 38 | 18 | Masters + principal license |
| David | White | Male | 35 | 17 | Ed.S. + Superintendent License |
| Erin | White | Female | 25 | 15 (Dean and AP 9 years) | Masters + 21 |
| Betty | White | Female | 34 | 16 (5 as AP) | Masters + principal license |
| Tyler | White | Male | 30 | 23 (3 years as an AP) | Ph.D. + Superintendent License |
| Nate | White | Male | 21 | 16 | Masters + Superintendent License |
| Paul | White | Male | 32 | 28 (5 as an AP) | Ed.D + Superintendent License |

Appendix F: Interview Outline for Participants

Logistical Clarifications

Review research questions:

1. What types of crucible experiences represented a significant leadership challenge?
2. How do participants describe the experience and its impact on their leadership?
3. How do crucible experiences affect principal perceptions and changes in their leadership, particularly concerning their interactions and work with members of the school and community?

*I'm interested in stories that truly rattled your cage and maybe even kept you up at night. These stories have had a profound impact on your leadership in some fundamental way and they stick out as crucible moments of your career.

Review Informed Consent document.

Greg will ask the participant three clarifying questions about the Informed Consent document:

1. What should you do if you wish to withdraw from the study?
2. What are the risks if you choose to participate?
3. What is the primary objective of this study?

Interview

Warm Up:

Please tell me about the experiences, credentials, and background you have gained that have enabled you to obtain the position of a lead principal.

Interview Prompt:

Please tell me about one or more leadership experiences you have encountered where powerful learning has taken place.

1. What was it like before the experience?
2. What sparked the incident?
3. How did you navigate the experience?
4. What were the key moments within the experience?
5. What did you learn from the experience?
6. How has this experience made you a better leader?

End of Interview:

1. Describe next steps in the research project.
2. Transcript reviews and modifications procedure.

3. Referrals
4. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

Appendix G: Interview Outline for Researcher

Thank the participant for their time and effort

Explain three research questions

1. What types of crucible experiences represented a significant leadership challenge?
2. How do participants describe the experience and its impact on their leadership?
3. How do crucible experiences affect principal perceptions and changes in their leadership, particularly concerning their interactions and work with members of the school and community?

Informed Consent-ask three questions about clarification:

1. What should you do if you wish to withdraw from this study?
2. What are the risks if you choose to participate?
3. What is the primary objective of this study?

Warm Up:

Start out by telling me about the experiences and background you have had that enabled you to obtain the position of a lead principal.

Candidate Questions:

Name

Age

Years in education

Years as a teacher

Years as a lead principal

Number of years as an assistant principal before your head job?

Race

Highest level of education

Start of Interview:

Please tell me about one or more leadership experiences you have encountered where powerful learning has taken place.

1. What was it like before the experience?
2. What sparked the incident?
3. How did you navigate the experience?
4. What were the key moments within the experience?
5. What did you learn from the experience?
6. How has this experience made you a better leader?

Potential Probing Questions:

1. What leadership skills were needed to navigate these difficult experiences?
2. How did your crucible experiences affect your perception of leadership and your interactions and work with members of the school and community?
3. If you could do it again, how or what would you do to better prepare yourself for that experience?
4. What advice do you have for novice or aspiring principals that might experience the same thing you did?
5. Do you have anything else you would like to share with me, or any advice for aspiring or novice principals?

End of Interview:

1. Describe next steps of my research project.
2. Thank them for their participation.
3. Let them know when they should be receiving a copy of the transcript from our interview.

Appendix H: Rev.com Non-Disclosure Agreement

CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

This CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, effective as of the date last set forth below (this “Agreement”), between the undersigned actual or potential client (“Client”) and Rev.com, Inc. (“Rev.com”) is made to confirm the understanding and agreement of the parties hereto with respect to certain proprietary information being provided to Rev.com for the purpose of performing translation, transcription and other document related services (the “Rev.com Services”). In consideration for the mutual agreements contained herein and the other provisions of this Agreement, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Scope of Confidential Information

1.1. “Confidential Information” means, subject to the exceptions set forth in Section 1.2 hereof, any documents, video files or other related media or text supplied by Client to Rev.com for the purpose of performing the Rev.com Services.

1.2. Confidential Information does not include information that: (i) was available to Rev.com prior to disclosure of such information by Client and free of any confidentiality obligation in favor of Client known to Rev.com at the time of disclosure; (ii) is made available to Rev.com from a third party not known by Rev.com at the time of such availability to be subject to a confidentiality obligation in favor of Client; (iii) is made available to third parties by Client without restriction on the disclosure of such information; (iv) is or becomes available to the public other than as a result of disclosure by Rev.com prohibited by this Agreement; or (v) is developed independently by Rev.com or Rev.com’s directors, officers, members, partners, employees, consultants, contractors, agents, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, “Associated Persons”).

2. Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information

2.1. Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information, other than furnishing the Confidential Information to Associated Persons; provided that such Associated Persons are bound by agreements respecting confidential information. Rev.com will not use any of the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing the Rev.com Services on Client’s behalf. Rev.com will use reasonable care and adequate measures to protect the security of the Confidential Information and to attempt to prevent any Confidential Information from being disclosed or otherwise made available to unauthorized persons or used in violation of the foregoing.

2.2. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, Rev.com is free to make, and this Agreement does not restrict, disclosure of any Confidential Information in a judicial, legislative or administrative investigation or proceeding or to a government or other regulatory agency; provided that, if permitted by law, Rev.com provides to Client prior notice of the intended disclosure and permits Client to intervene therein to protect its interests in the Confidential Information, and cooperate and assist Client in seeking to obtain such protection.

3. Certain Rights and Limitations

3.1. All Confidential Information will remain the property of Client.

3.2. This Agreement imposes no obligations on either party to purchase, sell, license, transfer or otherwise transact in any products, services or technology.

4. Termination

4.1. Upon Client's written request, Rev.com agrees to use good faith efforts to return promptly to Client any Confidential Information that is in writing and in the possession of Rev.com and to certify the return or destruction of all Confidential Information; provided that Rev.com may retain a summary description of Confidential Information for archival purposes.

4.2. The rights and obligations of the parties hereto contained in Sections 2 (Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information) (subject to Section 2.1), 3 (Certain Rights and Limitations), 4 (Termination), and 5 (Miscellaneous) will survive the return of any tangible embodiments of Confidential Information and any termination of this Agreement.

5. Miscellaneous

5.1. Client and Rev.com are independent contractors and will so represent themselves in all regards. Nothing in this Agreement will be construed to make either party the agent or legal representative of the other or to make the parties partners or joint venturers, and neither party may bind the other in any way. This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California governing such agreements, without regard

to conflicts-of-law principles. The sole and exclusive jurisdiction and venue for any litigation arising out of this Agreement shall be an appropriate federal or state court located in the State of California, and the parties agree not to raise, and waive, any objections or defenses based upon venue or forum non conveniens. This Agreement (together with any agreement for the Rev.com Services) contains the complete and exclusive agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and supersedes all prior agreements and understandings with respect thereto, whether written or oral, express or implied. If any provision of this Agreement is held invalid, illegal or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such will not affect any other provision of this Agreement, which will remain in full force and effect. No amendment or alteration of the terms of this Agreement will be effective unless made in writing and executed by both parties hereto. A failure or delay in exercising any right in respect to this Agreement will not be presumed to operate as a waiver, and a single or partial exercise of any right will not be presumed to preclude any subsequent or further exercise of that right or the exercise of any other right. Any modification or waiver of any provision of this Agreement will not be effective unless made in writing. Any such waiver will be effective only in the specific instance and for the purpose given.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have caused this Agreement to be executed below by their duly authorized signatories.

CLIENT

REV.COM, INC.

Print Name: Greg Martin

By: Cheryl Brown
Name: Cheryl Brown
Title: Account Manager
Date: April 7, 2017

Address for notices to Rev.com, Inc.:

251 Kearny St. FL 8
San Francisco, CA 94108