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# Principal leadership and the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND THE COLORADO INNOVATION  
SCHOOLS ACT OF 2008

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Margaret A. Walsh

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
Educational Leadership

December 2012

This dissertation by: Margaret A. Walsh

Entitled: *Principal Leadership and the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Educational Leadership

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

---

Linda Vogel, Ph.D., Co-Chair

---

Spencer C. Weiler, Ph.D., Co-Chair

---

Martha Cray, Ph.D., Committee Member

---

Linda Black, Ed.D., Committee Member

Date of Dissertation Defense \_\_\_\_\_

Accepted by the Graduate School

---

Linda L. Black, Ed.D., LPC  
Acting Dean of the Graduate School and International Admissions

## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the *Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008 (CISA)*. The CISA created a statewide system that allowed individual schools and entire districts to increase autonomy and flexibility in areas such as staffing, scheduling, educational programming, and resource allocation.

The data were collected from interviews with principals and a rural superintendent and from an examination of the School Innovation Plans. Data were refined into common themes, and a rich narrative was created. The conclusions indicated that successful principals of innovation schools understand the change process, focus on instructional leadership, promote a positive school culture, require autonomy, implement exemplary leadership strategies and qualities, and tailor innovation plans to the needs of the school. The conclusions also indicated that successful superintendents tailor innovation plans to the needs of the district.

This research is important because education reform in the United States is in need of school reform models that result in increased academic achievement. The implications for positive change are that schools given the autonomy and flexibility to

operate may have the potential to increase academic achievement. In addition, the CISA model has the potential to be replicated for application in other states. The experiences and perceptions of principals of innovation schools provided a window into the leadership role principals have in implementing the *Colorado Innovations Schools Act of 2008*.

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I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Marvin and Helen, who have always encouraged me to learn and pursue my dreams, and to my husband and best friend, James Patrick, who has supported me throughout the entire process.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.”*

*(John F. Kennedy, 1961,  
Proclamation 3422--American Education Week,  
The American Presidency Project)*

#### **Background for the Study**

For this study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. In this chapter, I will provide a context for modern school reform by examining the purpose of education, a condensed history of federal education reform, education reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and education reform in Colorado. I will also provide justification for the need for the study, present the research question, and provide definitions for some of the terminology that will be used in this study.

#### **Purpose of Education**

There is a relentless debate in the United States about how to develop schools that have the potential to successfully educate all of America’s children. Many people fondly remember the schools of the past, while others envision new models for schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The debate swirls as educators go about the daily work to educate the

students. What is the purpose of education? What does it mean to successfully educate all of America's children? Is there a common purpose upon which we can agree? Is it important to have such agreement?

Historically, the founding fathers included the concepts of democracy and liberty when stating the purpose of education. Thomas Jefferson said, "Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. . . . They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty" (Ellis, 2010, p. 63).

When I was a child, my father told his six children that he wanted us to grow up to be "good citizens." I remember asking him what that meant, and he told me that I would know when I became one. He planted the idea that education was very important and that I would grow up to be something very special, a good citizen. Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti stated, "The purpose of education is to lead us to some sense of citizenship, to some shared assumptions about individual freedoms and institutional needs, to some sense of the full claims of self as they are to be shared with others" (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997, p. 6).

TheodoreSizer declared, "Public education is an idea, not a mechanism. It promises every young citizen a fair grounding in the intellectual and civic tools necessary to have a decent life in this culture and economy" (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997, p. 40). With a hint of historical purpose, this statement brings us forward into the realistic purposes of education today. Education is a promise and an opportunity in which students can engage in learning and be successful in their lives. However, students are individuals from diverse cities and towns across our nation and the world. They come from a variety of backgrounds, races, economic levels, and experiences. As they

experience school, they also come to education with their own purposes. Some students may want to enter the workforce or serve in the military after high school. Other students may decide to go to college and earn a degree.

The difficulty in defining the purpose *of* education stems from the variety of purposes *for* education. The purposes *for* education are to: promote citizenship, maintain a democratic society, impart knowledge, build a workforce, develop socialization, and engage in the process of schooling (Smith, 2006). The stated purpose of education that has garnered some agreement is to develop the full potential of the individual, for the sake of both the individual and our democracy, and to provide systematic general education, addressing both the purposes of a democracy and the needs of the individual (Smith, 2006).

### **History of Federal Education Reform**

A brief history of federal educational reform in the past 50 years will follow. It will serve to provide the context for the topic of this study which involves reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The history that follows will begin with the 1950s.

#### **The 1950s Launch New Concerns**

When the Russian spaceship, Sputnik, was launched in 1957, it caused the United States to question the excellence of its schools. There was concern that the United States might not be able to compete with the scientific excellence that had created such a dramatic space launch. As it turned out, “the missile gap was a myth, a misperception that was easily sold to the American public at the time” (Zhao, 2009, p. 21). Also in the 1950s, *Brown vs. Board of Education* was decided and made segregation illegal in public

schools. These two events left a lasting impact on schools and the reforms that would follow.

### **The 1960s Change Perspectives**

The controversial *Coleman Report* was published in 1966. The findings reported that the quality of school resources and services did not necessarily indicate the quality of education provided for students. The conclusions of the report also meant that giving more money to schools did not, on its own, increase academic achievement. “The importance of the *Coleman Report* was that it changed the perspective to concentrating on student performance, and that has endured” (Hanushek, 2008, p. 19). It was not, however, until Jimmy Carter became president and created the Department of Education on October 17, 1979, that the concentration on student academic performance began in earnest.

### **The 1980s Warn of a Nation at Risk**

A national report that challenged the effectiveness of the schools in America was *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. It was published in 1983 and delivered a “fire and brimstone sermon about education” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 2). A report commissioned by then Secretary of Education Bell, this report sounded alarms in every corner of the country that the public schools were providing an inferior education to that of other countries and putting the future of our country at risk. The report made recommendations for improvements in all areas of schooling. It stated in the first few sentences, “Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). This report echoed much

of the anxiety that had permeated the United States 26 years earlier with the Sputnik launch.

Reform intensified after the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. In the 1990s, charter schools and school vouchers were growing. Chartered schools are examples of schools that have “the freedom to step outside the departmental structure of the district schools,” and “create new architectures for learning” (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008, p. 209). Educational vouchers refer to “a system of public finance in which parents would be given a tuition certificate that could be used to pay for tuition at identified and approved public or private schools” (Levin, 2002, p. 4). Both of these initiatives represent significant opportunities for parents to select the schools their children would attend. The concern about both charter schools and vouchers, however, is that they are in direct competition for the tax dollars that follow the students. The concept of school vouchers continues to be a controversial education reform. Charter schools that are part of the public school system persist as a popular option, however.

### **The 1990s Establish New Goals**

*Goals 2000: Educate American Act of 1994* was an important policy because it furthered the development of academic systems and structures. The governors of the United States began the call to upgrade academic standards in English, math, and social studies by setting the National Education Goals for 2000. Standards were established in nearly all of the content areas (Marzano & Haystead, 2008). *Goals 2000* continued to move the conversation forward regarding academic standards, measuring student progress, and supporting students to meet the standards.



## **The 2000s Leave No Child Behind**

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 resulted in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which is the most far-reaching, modern reform. NCLB contained requirements for schools and districts that increased accountability and offered more school choice for parents. States were required to establish academic standards in reading and math, assess student proficiency in relation to the standards, achieve average yearly progress (AYP), employ highly qualified teachers, provide school options for parents, and achieve student proficiency by 2014. Each of these components is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Much has been written in response to NCLB, and much of it has been negative. “The goal of NCLB is the destruction of public schools, not their salvation. NCLB sets the schools up to fail and be privatized” (Bracey, 2004, p. 69). “The Bush administration’s reform mandates for public schools are under-funded, anti-educational, and are resulting in de-skilled teachers as well as students who have disengaged from learning” (Poetter, Wegwart, & Haerr, 2006, p. 88). “It seems more to be the epitome of leaving all children behind in terms of any serious attempt to reform public schooling in the United States” (Roselli, 2005, p. 20). The support for NCLB has been mostly that it provides accountability for achievement and that it draws attention to the students often left behind by a school system, including special education students, those who speak a second language, and students from families with low economic status (Finn, 2008).

NCLB can also be viewed as symptomatic of the intense pressure on public schools in the current political, economic, and social climate of the nation. The country is currently in an economic crisis, and some people view education reform as a solution.

Others want to dismantle public education as a failed enterprise and believe alternative schools such as charters and vouchers are the solutions. The national discordance about the purpose and future of schooling is at a fever pitch. “The most crucial issue facing public schools in the new millennium is whether the current system can--or even should--survive the pressures of disintegration that have come to the fore in recent years” (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 438).

This brief historical review of federal education reform in the United States is not meant to be inclusive. Rather, it is intended to show the progression of reforms from Sputnik to NCLB, from intense doubt about the excellence of our nation’s schools to increased accountability measures that are intended to promote excellence in our schools. As the 21st Century begins, new models are emerging.

### **Educational Reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Education in the United States is in need of reform for its 21st Century schools because not all students are achieving success in our schools. This has created an achievement gap, a disparity between students who are achieving and those who are not. This achievement gap exists between cohorts of White, Hispanic, and Black students.

#### **Eliminate the Achievement Gap**

There is a perception in the United States that schools are failing, and students are not learning as well as they used to. This is not true. “In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), average scores in reading and math are higher than they were 30 years ago” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 2). The challenge in education today is to “educate all students to high levels” City et al. (2009).

The challenge for reform in the schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is to eliminate the achievement gap that exists between White, Hispanic, and Black students. Achievement gaps are defined by NAEP as “statistically significant differences in averages scores between two student groups” (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011, p. 4).

NAEP recently issued two reports on the achievement gaps. The first report details the achievement gap that exists between Hispanic and White students, and the second report details the gap between Black and White students. “At the national level, the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students at grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and reading was between 21 and 26 points on the NAEP scale (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011, p. 4). In reading and math, no significant change was reported in the level and persistence of the achievement gap between 1990-2009 (Hemphill, Vanneman, & Rahman, 2011).

The second NAEP report on the comparison of Black and White students reported that at both ages 9 and 13, the reading and mathematics scores for both Black and White students were higher in 2004 than in any previous assessment. However, in mathematics, a 23-point achievement gap existed for age 9 public school students, and a 26- point gap at age 13. In reading, a 26 point gap existed for age 9 students, and a 21 point gap for age 13 students (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

In summary, the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students is between 21 and 26 points in math and reading. The achievement gap between Black and White students is between 21 and 26 points in math and reading. This is the reform that is needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools--eliminate the achievement gap.

**Increase the Graduation Rate**

Another persistent problem in education that must be changed is the high rate of students dropping out of high school. The good news is that the high school graduation rate in the United States has reached its highest point in two decades (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, the latest statistics indicate that in 2008, 72% of students graduated from high school, while 28% dropped out. In addition, the Alliance reported that every racial and ethnic group posted solid gains in their 2008 graduation rate for the second year in a row (2011). While these are encouraging statistics, the reform that is needed for 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools is to graduate all of our students from high school.

**Accomplish Federal Reforms**

The federal government recently allocated a stimulus package of \$77 billion to states in support of K-12 education. It invested \$3.5 billion to turn around the performance of 800-900 schools in the nation using School Improvement Grants (Manwaring, 2011). Districts or schools received \$6 million spread over three years to implement one of the four reforms: turnaround, restart, close/consolidate, or transformation. In addition, \$8.5 billion was set aside for the Race to the Top Fund to push for specific reforms, the Teacher Incentive Fund to promote reforms for teacher pay, and the Investing in Innovation Fund to support school innovations (Manwaring, 2011).

President Obama promised to improve assessment and accountability systems in the reallocation of NCLB. He declared, “Now is the time to finally meet our moral obligation to provide every child a world-class education” (Obama Education Plan, 2009,

p. 100). His platform of hope and change are important to the future of 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools.

### **Education Reform in Colorado**

I will shift the focus from national reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to the education reform taking place in the state of Colorado. Reform efforts in Colorado have come fast and furious in the past 20 years. These reforms are taking place within the larger context of national education reforms.

#### **The Colorado Paradox**

The state of Colorado passed the Charter Schools Act of 1993 and established itself as a state willing to assume a leadership role in modern school reform. An examination of K-12 public school education in Colorado since the Charter Schools Act was passed in 1993 reveals that a major challenge facing the state is the “Colorado Paradox.” The Colorado Paradox refers to the fact that “the state has one of the most educated populations in the country but below-average rates of post-secondary attendance and completion” (Engdahl, 2009, p. 4). Colorado has become “a net importer of college-prepared people” (Caley, 2011, p. 1). This statement was made by Stephen M. Jordan, President of Metro State College of Denver, and it underscores the importance of educating Colorado’s own students from preschool through college, rather than relying on recruiting educated people from outside the state (Caley, 2011).

Educating the children of Colorado has become even more challenging in the past decade. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of children living in poverty in Colorado more than doubled, rising faster than any other state in the nation (Piscopo, 2011). The impacts of poverty are especially acute for children under the age of 10, and the

correlations between socioeconomic status and cognitive development can be significant (Jensen, 2009). The implications for education are far-ranging and enormous, especially with so many students living in poverty, and a poverty rate that is rising so quickly.

To address the Colorado Paradox and other issues facing education in Colorado in 2007, then Governor Bill Ritter, Jr. issued Executive Order (B 003 07) which established the first P-20 Education Coordinating Council (Lopez, 2008). The purpose of the council included making recommendations regarding the education goals outlined in Governor Ritter's campaign platform called the "Colorado Promise." The focus of the Colorado Promise "was on tackling one of Colorado's greatest challenges: the formation of a seamless education system from preschool to graduate school to prepare Colorado's young people for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (Lopez, 2008, p. 2). Two of the important components of the Colorado Promise were to cut the Colorado high school dropout rate in half and double the Colorado high school graduation rate.

The accomplishments of the P-20 Education Coordinating Council included passing Senate Bill 212, The Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K). CAP4K included establishing post secondary and workforce readiness, new content standards, new state tests, and an alignment of college requirements with the newly defined P-12 system (Lopez, 2008). "Put together, they represent a fundamental change in the future of public education that will benefit Colorado children for decades to come" (Lopez, 2008, p. 3). Within this dynamic environment of change and education reform in 2008, the Colorado legislature passed the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008.

## **The Colorado Innovation Schools Act (CISA) of 2008**

The CISA of 2008 is the topic of this study. This section will provide information about the provisions of the act that lead to the designation and operation of innovation schools. It will also include the political context of CISA, identifying the districts and schools seeking innovation status, the application process, suggested innovations, financial support, waivers from Colorado Statutory Regulations, collective bargaining, accountability, and legal challenges.

**Political context of CISA.** The bill was sponsored by then Senate President Peter C. Groff (D-Denver), currently the director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U. S. Department of Education. The purpose of the bill was to encourage schools and school districts to innovate in their approach to improving student performance. “With passage of this bill, we have new tools to improve student performance and close the achievement gap by allowing more innovation in the way we educate our kids” (Meyer, 2008, p. 1). Groff continually focused on the importance of meeting the individual needs of students (Meyer, 2008). The Colorado Education Association issued a statement in opposition to the bill, “There is no research to show that abandoning state laws and collective bargaining improves student achievement” (Meyer, 2008, p. 1).

**The elements of CISA.** The CISA is intended to provide a structure, or pathway, in support of Colorado schools that elect to tailor their educational services to meet the needs of their students and communities. The act grants autonomy and flexibility to schools that elect to apply for innovative status through the local school board. It is also intended to encourage schools to innovate in the essential areas of the school. This

legislation grants a high level of freedom to school leaders in areas that include, but are not limited to: (a) recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and compensation of staff; (b) scheduling the length of the school day and school year; (c) curriculum, instruction, standards, assessment, and other educational programming; and (d) resource allocation. The goal of the bill is to increase academic achievement. This law is part of a national movement called Innovation-based Systemic Reform.

**CISA as part of national reform.** A current policy trend in the United States is the creation of new schools that operate within what are called Innovative School Zones. An Innovative Zone is defined as one that is an organized within a local or state public education system where entrepreneurs are afforded the autonomy, authority, and incentive necessary to pursue innovation free from interference (Education Innovating, 2011). These schools are provided the autonomy they need to pursue innovation. The work is being led by a group called Education Evolving that consists of business and educational members. These members are listed as: Wingspread, the Hewlett Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Stanford University School of Education, the progressive Policy Institute, and Hamline University (Education Innovating, 2011).

Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Denver are the major cities involved in creating the climate for new and different innovation schools while working to improve existing schools (Education Innovating, 2011). Each of these cities has established an organizational structure for allowing innovative schools (see Table 1). These are not minor structural changes within these school districts, but new offices charged with establishing new schools that do things differently. The motivation for



change for these school districts seems to be related to obtaining federal funding from sources such as the Race to the Top Fund.

Table 1

*Cities and States Involved in Innovation Reform*

Agency	Year	Policy Reform Action
<b>City School District</b>		
Boston Public Schools	1994	Created pilot schools
Denver Public Schools	2005	Established Office of School Reform & Innovation
Los Angeles City Board of Education	2006	Established pilot schools program
Baltimore City Public Schools	2007	Established Office of New Initiatives
Chicago Public Schools	In progress	Established new schools growth plan
Minneapolis Public Schools	In progress	Established Office of New Schools
New York City Public Schools	In progress	Established Office of Portfolio Planning
<b>State</b>		
Colorado	2008	Innovation Schools Act of 2008
Minnesota	2009	Legislation to create autonomous schools
West Virginia	2009	Exempted schools from certain state policies
Massachusetts	2010	Education reform legislation to create innovation schools

*Note.* Source: <http://www.educationinnovating.org/zones>.

These schools have independence from existing district policy constraints and the autonomy to try innovative practices to increase academic achievement. The foundations supporting the movement include the Walton Family Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Saint Paul Foundation. Ted Kolderie is the major author of the white paper found on their website. The group is “working on the edge of--and sometimes beyond--the policy consensus of the moment” (Education Innovating, 2011).

Tyack and Cuban (1997) were clear in their beliefs that “One lesson for reforms is that decentralized approaches to change, drawing on local knowledge of problems and potential solutions, will be likely to capture public support” (p. 33). There is evidence that public support for innovation schools has been garnered by their development in some of the major cities in our country. Their future rests on their ability to increase academic achievement and demonstrate that their innovative practices are worthy of replication.

Schools designated Innovation Schools. There are 23 schools that have successfully completed the application process and received designation as innovation schools in Colorado. One small school district has been designated a District of Innovation because all three of its schools are innovation schools. Appendix A outlines schools and the single district that have received innovation status, the schools that have submitted applications, and the schools or districts planning to apply for innovation status.

There are several levels of innovation status. A school district granted innovation status for the entire district is called a *District of Innovation*. A group of schools within a

district is referred to as an *Innovation School Zone* upon approval. A school within a district is called an *Innovation School* if approved.

**Process for innovation school designation.** The process for a school or group of schools that want to gain innovation status involves an interaction between the local school board and the Colorado State School Board. The step-by-step process is outlined below.

1. A public school of a Colorado school district submits an innovation plan to the local school board. A group of public schools within a district may submit their innovation plan jointly.
2. A local school board reviews each innovation plan and approves or disproves the plan within 60 days.
3. If the school board rejects the plan, it will provide a written explanation to the school or schools that submitted the plan. The school or schools may submit an amended plan at any time after denial.
4. If the school board approves the plan, it may proceed to seek innovation designation for the school or schools applying from the Colorado State Board of Education.
5. A school board may initiate and collaborate with public schools to create innovation plans.
6. The Colorado State Board of Education and the Commissioner of the state of Colorado have 60 days to respond to the local school board. Reasons for denying the application for innovation status include concern that the plan will result in decreased academic achievement and a lack of fiscal feasibility.

7. The state board must provide a written explanation to the local board if innovation status is not granted. The school may submit an amended innovation plan for reconsideration any time after the denial.

**Applications for innovation schools status.** The application itself must contain specific information as required by the policy. The information that must be included is:

1. A statement of the public school's mission and why designation as an innovation school would increase the school's ability to achieve its mission.
2. A description of the innovations the public school would implement including, but not limited to: staffing, scheduling, educational programming, and resource allocation.
3. A list of the programs, policies, or operational documents that the public school affected by the innovations, including: educational program, length of day and year, graduation policies, assessment plan, budget, and staffing.
4. Expectations for improvement in academic performance.
5. Estimate of the cost savings, if any, expected as a result of implementing innovations.
6. Evidence that a majority of the administrators and teachers employed at the school and a majority of the School Advisory Council for the school consent to designation as an innovation school.
7. A statement of the level of support for designation as an innovation school by other employees of the school, the students and parents of the school, and the community surrounding the school.

8. A description of any statutory sections of the Colorado Innovation Act of 2008, or any regulatory or district policy requirements that would need to be waived.

9. A description of any provisions of the collective bargaining agreement for the personnel at the school that would need to be waived.

10. Any additional information required by the local school board in the district where the plan would be implemented.

11. A plan for creating an Innovation School Zone will follow the same steps, except to add how the innovations in the public schools in School Innovation Zone would be integrated to achieve results that would be less like accomplished by each school on its own.

**Suggested innovations.** The Colorado Innovation Act contains a list of suggested innovations that it would “strongly encourage” schools and school boards to include in their school plans. These suggested innovations include:

1. Curriculum and academic standards and assessments.
2. Accountability measures that include: graduation or exit exams; course summative assessments; student portfolios; national and international assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).
3. Measuring the percentage of students going on to college.
4. Measuring the percentage of students simultaneously earning a high school diploma and an associate’s degree or a career and technical education certificate.

5. Services for special education students, gifted and talented students, English as a second language students, and students at risk of failure, expulsion, or dropping out, as well as Department of Human Services and county Social Services.

6. Teachers recruitment, training, preparation, professional development; teacher employment; principal and teacher performance expectations and evaluation procedures; and compensation for personnel, including performance pay plans and other innovations regarding retirement and benefits.

7. School governance and the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for principals.

8. Preparation and counseling for students as they transition to higher education or the work force.

**Financial support.** The Colorado Innovation Act contains a statement of financial support for schools that are designated innovation schools. They are “encouraged” to find and accept public and private gifts, grants, and donation to help cover the costs of developing and implementing their innovative plans. This may prove important to schools that are working to bring their neighborhoods and communities together in support of the plan to become an innovative school.

**Waiver of statutory and regulatory requirements.** One of the most important components of the CISA is the waiver of statutory and regulatory requirements for schools seeking innovation status. The policy states that it will waive statutes or rules requested by the innovation plan, although there are some exceptions. The policies that the state board will not waive are identified in Table 2.

Table 2

*Colorado Innovations Schools Act of 2008 Waiver Exclusions of the Colorado Revised Statutes*

Statute/Regulation	Exception
Any statute included in Title 22 of the Colorado Revised Statutes may be waived	Section 22-2-117 (1) (b) Public School Finance Act, Article 54 (CRS 22-54-1010 et seq.) Exceptional Children's Educational Act, Article 20 (CRS 22-20-101 et seq.) Education Accountability Act Provisions pertaining to data necessary for performance reports, Part 5 of Article 11 (CRS 22-20-101 et seq.) Any provision of Title 22 related to fingerprinting and criminal history checks Children's Internet Protection Act, Article 87 (CRS 22-87-101 et seq.)
Article 64 Retirement Systems Act	None
Any statutes not in Title 22, including Article 51 of Title 24, Public Employees Retirement Association Act	None

*Note.* Source: *Guidance for Completing the Model Innovation School Application, Get Smart Schools Innovation Resources*, p. 6.

In addition, schools applying for innovative status will not receive waivers from federal statutes and regulations, including the Disabilities in Education Act and No Child Left Behind. The 22 schools approved for innovation statuses will still be funded in compliance with the Public School Finance Act of 1994 and may seek outside sources of funding, as mentioned earlier.

**Collective bargaining.** The CISA allows schools granted innovation status to waive collective bargaining agreements. The waiver is contingent on obtaining the approval by secret ballot of at least 60% of the members of the collective bargaining unit

employed at the innovation school. People who are in the collective bargaining unit at the school may transfer to another public school if they elect not to support this collective action.

**School accountability and reporting.** Accountability is an integral part of the Innovation Schools Act. Another role of the Commissioner and the Colorado State School Board is to submit by March 1 of each year a report concerning the districts of innovation. The report will include facts about the schools, including demographics, academic performance, and suggestions for legislative changes to the Colorado Innovation Schools Act.

**Conclusion.** The CISA of 2008 is a recent school reform measure that seems to slowly be gaining the attention of schools. As of the fall of 2011, there are 23 schools that have been granted innovation status. That number includes one District of Innovation comprised of three schools.

Intriguing innovations can also be glimpsed in the governance of American public schooling. They're scattered and patchy, and we cannot yet know how they will turn out, but they signal new found openness in some communities to experimenting with unconventional arrangements, all worth trying and some, in my eye, holding fair promise. (Finn, 2008, p. 276)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Education reform in the United States is in need of school reform models that produce the desired result of increasing academic achievement. New school reform models are moving away from centralized school districts and toward decentralized, autonomous models such as charter schools and innovation schools. Evidence is lacking regarding the effectiveness of innovation schools.



### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008.

### **Guiding Research Question**

The following research question guided this qualitative inquiry:

RQ1: What were the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovative status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined as follows.

*Innovation School*: A school in which a local school board implements an innovation plan pursuant to Section 22-32.5-107 of the Colorado Innovative Schools Act of 2008.

*Innovations*: “Strategies, products, or approaches that improve significantly upon the status quo and can be taken to scale to address persistent educational challenges” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 1).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented background information including an overview of the purpose of education, a condensed history of federal education reform, reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and Colorado School Reform, specifically, the CISA of 2008. This chapter also contained the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and definitions of the terminology that will be used in the study. In Chapter II, I will present a review of the literature used for this study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this literature review, I will provide a definition for innovation, a brief history of innovation and reform efforts, explore current innovation efforts in Colorado, examine the role of the principal, and analyze the role of the principal in the implementation of the Colorado Innovations Schools Act of 2008.

An extensive search of the professional educational journals from the past 15 years was conducted using the following World Web search engines: Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost), ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), CEPM (Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management), CERI (Centre for Education Research and Innovation), and NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research). In addition, an extensive search of professional books, articles, and online articles was conducted.

#### **Innovation and Change**

Innovation is a word that has a variety of meanings. It is often used synonymously in the literature with terms such as reform, initiative, and change. For this study, I will define innovations as the “strategies, products, or approaches that improve significantly upon the status quo and can be taken to scale to address persistent educational challenges” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 1). In addition, the use

of the word innovation will be applied in the same way that it is used in the literature which is to be interchangeable with reform, initiative, and change.

Innovations in education occur at all levels of the system, from the classrooms to the federal level. An innovation can be as simple as a new instructional classroom strategy or as complex as a policy change at the federal level. “Educational change is a sociopolitical process involving all kinds of individual, classroom, school, local, regional, and national factors at work in interactive ways” (Fullan, 2001, p. 8). School districts experience reform from different sources including state or national initiatives, district-wide reform, and whole school models of reform (Fullan, 2001). These reforms are often imposed on the schools and impact the cultures of the districts and schools.

An understanding of the change process enhances the process of making decisions about implementing or not implementing educational change. “Neglect of the phenomenology of change--that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended--is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms” (Fullan, 2001, p. 8). How individuals come to grips with change, make meaning from change, and build capacity about the change are the keys for future change (Fullan, 2001, p. 29).

### **History of Educational Innovation and Reform**

“Educational reforms are planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and educational problems” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 3). There is no shortage of educational reforms and innovations being promoted for implementation in schools. These reforms may or may not contribute to improvement in student achievement, but they do add to the endless list of initiatives that “sap the strength and

spirit of schools” (Hatch, 2000, p. 4). In a study of 57 school districts from 1992-1995, a typical urban school district was involved in at least eleven initiatives (Hess, 1998, p. 102). Sometimes, innovations turn out to be “burdens in disguise” (Fullan, 2001, p. 24).

“Educational reforms are intrinsically political in origin” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 93). A recent example is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation enacted during the Bush administration. The goal of NCLB was for all students to be proficient in reading, writing, and math by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This policy was imposed from the federal level and exerted negative sanctions on schools with the hope of reforming education. In 2011, the reauthorization of NCLB allowed states to receive waivers from the law as the public comes to realize that the goal will not be achieved.

“School reform is also a prime arena for debating the shape of the future of the society” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 136). Americans have a long history of viewing schools as a way to continue our democratic beliefs and values while teaching children the knowledge and skills they need to become happy and productive citizens (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997). The aim of modern school reform should not be to win a competition between countries but to improve student learning with “adaptability to local circumstance” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 152). The aim of school reform must be to close the achievement gap in the nation’s schools so that all students are learning at high levels, graduating from high school, and attending college, joining the workforce, or enlisting in the armed services in a state of academic preparedness.

## **Promising Innovations**

There are countless educational innovations and reforms that have taken place since the days of the one room school house. These innovations have occurred in all areas of education, including pedagogy, student learning, curriculum, use of data, standards, and many other areas too numerous to comprehend. These reforms and innovations have happened over time and have led us to the doorstep of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What are some of the innovations that hold promise for eradicating the achievement gap, motivating all high school students to graduate, and providing a high quality education for all students? For this discussion, I will consider the development of innovative schools that hold potential for the future of public education--charter schools, online schools, and the School of One.

**Charter schools.** “Charter schools are largely viewed as a major innovation in the public school landscape” (Betts & Tang, 2011, p. 1). Charter schools are more independent from state policies and have opportunities to try innovations (p.1). Chartered schools are examples of schools that have “the freedom to step outside the departmental structure of the district schools,” and “create new architectures for learning” (Christensen, 1997). They are more agile at responding to the needs of students.

**Online learning.** “Blended learning is but one of several innovations that can transform public schools” (Horn, 2011, p. 1). Horn has written extensively about innovation and its impact on learning. In a recent address to the Washington Education Innovation Forum in Seattle, Horn explained that blended learning and other innovations “allow teachers to take on new professional roles and use classroom time more effectively” (Horn, 2011, p.1). Blended learning is a way that students use time

differently, spending part of their school week attending a traditional school and part of the school week working online. This is particularly important for rural schools and urban schools that lack the resources and access to rigorous classes.

**School of one.** Joel Rose is the founder and former Chief Executive Officer of New York City Department of Education's School of One. The School of One was named by *TIME* magazine as one of the 50 best inventions of 2009. The concept of the School of One is to mix technology and customized lessons to meet the individual needs of each student (Light, Reitzes, & Cerron, 2009). The concept behind the design of the School of One is that education must be personalized for every student. The School of One is a new model that has shown early promise. I chose to include it here because it demonstrates a mix of the innovations suggested by the research for a school to get results, such as using of data to guide instruction, individualizing for instruction, using formative and summative assessments each day, integrating technology, and implementing best instructional practices.

Charter schools, online schools, and School of One are “strategies, products, or approaches that improve significantly upon the status quo and can be taken to scale to address persistent educational challenges” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 1). They fit the definition of innovations, have developed over the history of public education in America and offer promise for the future of public education.

### **Current Innovations in Colorado**

There are major educational innovations taking place in Colorado. The discussion that follows will consider several of these innovations and reforms including the waiver request from NCLB in 2011, the Great Teacher and Leader Act of 2010, the Education

Accountability Act of 2009, the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K) of 2008, the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008, the Online Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Education Division of 2007, and the Colorado Charter School Act of 1993

### **Waiver from NCLB**

Colorado is one of 11 states that requested a waiver in November, 2011 from the federal NCLB policy (Robles, 2011). The waiver requests that Colorado be allowed to rely on its own system of accountability for the performance of the states' schools and school districts. The waiver is based on the development and implementation of the Colorado growth model. The Colorado growth model was developed in 2009 and provides the tools for looking at how students grow from one year to the next in their academic performance in relation to the state standards (CDE, 2011).

The growth model also identifies how schools are progressing in relation to academic achievement toward the state standards. The Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) has been used over the past decade to gather student and school data. Beginning in the spring of 2012, the assessment will be called the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) as the state transitions to a new Colorado assessment (CDE, 2011). The use of the Colorado growth model is an innovative practice that gives the stakeholders the opportunity to look at the growth of each student, school, and district over time.

### **Accountability for Principals and Teachers**

Colorado Senate Bill 191 is called the Great Teacher and Leader Bill. It was passed by the legislature in the spring of 2010 and will be fully implemented in 2014.

One of the purposes of this innovative law is to identify and evaluate the role of principals. The law requires principals to be evaluated annually with 50% of the evaluation based on student achievement and the ability of principals to develop teachers in their buildings and increase their effectiveness. The principals in the district where I work received training on the Rubric for Evaluating Colorado's Principals in November, 2011, and will be part of the Beta Test version for the 2011-2012 school year.

How does Senate Bill 191 define principal effectiveness? Principal effectiveness is defined as:

*The Statewide Definition of Principal Effectiveness:*

Effective principals in the state of Colorado are responsible for the collective success of their schools, including the learning, growth and achievement of both students and staff. As the school's primary instructional leader, effective principals enable critical discourse and data-driven reflection about curriculum, assessment, instruction, and student progress, and create structures to facilitate improvement. Effective principals are adept at creating systems that maximize the utilization of resources and human capital, foster collaboration, and facilitate constructive change. By creating a common vision and articulating shared values, effective principals lead and manage their schools in a manner that supports the school's ability to promote equity and to continually improve its positive impact on students and families.

The Model Evaluation System for Principals created as a result of this law is a standards-based instrument that reflects the professional practices of principals and focuses on student growth. Standards I-VI relate to professional knowledge and practices that contribute to effective school leadership. Standard VII establishes student growth as a requirement for principal effectiveness ([www.cde.state.co.us](http://www.cde.state.co.us)). Standards I-VII are the most current statements about the role of principals and will serve as the framework for evaluating Colorado principals.

- Standard I: Principals demonstrate strategic leadership.
- Standard II: Principals demonstrate instructional leadership.
- Standard III: Principals demonstrate school cultural and equity leadership.



- Standard IV: Principals demonstrate human resource leadership.
- Standard V: Principals demonstrate managerial leadership.
- Standard VI: Principals demonstrate external development leadership.
- Standard VII: Principals demonstrate leadership around student growth.

### **Aligning Accountability Systems**

Under the Education Accountability Act of 2009, CDE evaluates and accredits Colorado school districts using four performance indicators: academic achievement, academic growth, academic growth gaps, and postsecondary and workforce readiness (CDE, 2011). The policy requires school districts in Colorado to create improvement reports for the district and each school. The annual reports are called Unified Improvement Plans (UIP) and provide information related to data trends, root causes, and strategies and resources to improve student academic outcomes (CDE, 2011). The first plans were written during the 2010-11 school year and the plans are posted on schoolview.com for all stakeholders to see.

**Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K).** In May of 2008, legislation was signed into law to align the Colorado education system from preschool through college. It mandated creating new standards and assessments for 21<sup>st</sup> Century students (CDE, 2011). Educators across the state have been working on updating the Colorado State Standards and new assessments. The CAP4K will also support the Colorado application for the Race to the Top funds (CDE, 2011).

**Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008.** The Colorado Innovation Schools Act (CISA) is the topic of this study. The CISA created a statewide system that allows individual schools and entire districts to increase their autonomy and flexibility in the quest to raise academic achievement. The areas in which greater autonomy will be allowed include: staffing, scheduling, educational programming, and resource allocation.

School district boards of education have the authority to grant innovative status to schools through a process of school applications that detail innovative plans. In addition, the school district boards may petition the Colorado State School Board to waive statutes or rules requested in the innovative plans.

**Online schools.** Senate bill 215 created an online schools division in 2007 through the Colorado Department of Education. The role of CDE was determined to be support of online programs and certifying the online programs (CDE, 2011). In the school year 2010-1011, there were over 15, 000 students registered in online programs in Colorado which is 1.8% of all of the students statewide (CDE, 2011).

**Charter schools.** The Colorado Charter School Act of 1993 created public schools that operate under a school contract or charter within the school district in which the charter school operates (CDE, 2011). There are currently 170 charter schools in Colorado serving nearly 72,000 students which represents 8.8% of the K-12 students in Colorado (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 2011). “Evidence of strong academic performance of charter schools is provided by both federal and state measure of student achievement (Colorado League of Charter Schools, 2011, p. 1).

The innovations and reforms discussed in this section have occurred over a period of nearly 20 years and have been focused on increased accountability and choice for a state educational system searching to increase student academic performance. Each of the reforms in this discussion has been policies legislated from the state or federal level. There are also innovations taking place at the school and classroom levels, but these are outside the scope of this study.

## **Role of the Principal**

Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts (75 nights a year). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency. (Evans, 1996, p. 36)

This humorous advertisement illustrates the complexity of the role of the school principal. There is a wealth of research about the role of principals (Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour and Marzano, 2009; Harris, 2004; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996; Leithwood and Strauss, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003). In this review, I will discuss the changing and evolving role of the principal leading innovation and reform initiatives.

It seems redundant to consider the role of the school principal in relation to innovation because a key role of the principal is to lead and oversee innovation and change. Principals are indispensable to innovation (Evans, 2001). What are the roles that principals assume in bringing about innovation in their schools?

### **Principal as Leader**

The leadership role of principals has evolved and changed over the past few decades as the emphasis has shifted from managing the building to accountability for increasing student academic performance. This shift in perspective means less emphasis on the principal's role as a manager and more emphasis on responsibilities for instructional leadership (Hallinger, 1992). An Educational Research Service study on the role of principals concluded, "Researchers, policy makers, and educational practitioners agree: good school principals are the keystone of good schools (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000, p. 8).

A recent study was conducted on the principal's role in school effectiveness (Hallinger & Heck). The research over the past 15 years on the impact that principals have on schools was examined. The study looked at research that supported the role of the principal in relation to school effectiveness as well as the research that had called into question the effectiveness of the principal. The study concluded that principals "exercise a measurable, though indirect, effect on school effectiveness and student achievement" (p. 187). Another conclusion of the study was that principals "influence school performance by shaping school goals, direction, structure, and organizational and social networks" (p. 187). Further, successful principal leadership "guides the school policies, procedures and practices that contribute directly to student learning" (p. 187).

"The role of principals is about practice not personality" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 63). Kouzes and Posner identified five practices that exemplify the leadership of effective principals: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (p. 64). These practices were identified two decades ago and are still relevant today (p. 64). These practices support the belief that leadership is a relationship between those who "aspire to lead and those who choose to follow" (p. 70). The principal roles that have evolved over time are manager, instructional leader/learning leader, and transformational leader.

### **Principal as Manager**

In the 1960s and 1970s, the role of the principal was to manage the school. The old fashioned model of the Lone Ranger principal who handles all of the duties heroically and single-handedly has been replaced by modern roles for the school principal. "The

old model of formal, one-person leadership leaves the substantial talents of teachers largely untapped” (Lambert, 2002, p. 37).

### **Principal as Instructional Leader**

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) advocated for the role of the principal to be that of an instructional leader. These three researchers advocated tying professional development and scheduling to academics, not just managing the school building. Direction setting was also the role of principals who had the responsibility of knowing what was taught in all of the content areas. Papa and Baxter (2008) added hiring practices that gave autonomy to principals and helped them identify the critical factors for which they were screening teachers within the interview process to the responsibilities of instructional leaders. The use and interpretation of data to inform decision-making was extensively cited as another element needed (Ross & Gray, 2006).

### **Principal as Learning Leader**

DuFour and Marzano (2009) promoted a model for the role of the principal called learning leadership. Learning leadership advances the role of principals from instructional leaders to learning leaders. The shift in terms is subtle but the role of principals looks much different when doing the work of learning leaders. “We advocate for a new image. If the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure that all students learn at high levels, then schools do not need instructional leaders--they need learning leaders who focus on evidence of learning” (DuFour & Marzano, 2009, p. 63).

One of the roles and responsibilities of principals most directly impacted in a shift from instructional leaders to learning leaders is the process of teacher supervision and evaluation. Principals who are learning leaders provide opportunities for teacher

collaboration, engage in progress monitoring to identify if students are learning, and empower teachers with the tools they need to be effective (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). The most fundamental shift is that principals who are learning leaders work collaboratively with teams to increase student achievement.

### **Principal as Transformational Leader**

Transformational leadership has the ultimate goal of inspiration and motivation. Transformational leadership appeals to the intrinsic values and beliefs of school staff. Transformational leadership has three different characteristics: “charisma (identifying and sustaining a vision of the organization), intellectual stimulation of members, and individual consideration” (Ross & Gray, 2006, p. 2). One of the most important abilities of transformational leaders is that of motivating staff beyond self-interest. This type of motivation facilitates teachers’ beliefs in their own capacity and commitment to improving student achievement. The staff “embraces organizational goals” and demonstrate a need to align their own instructional practices (p. 2). Transformational leaders know how to develop self-efficacy, which leads individuals to go beyond the formal requirements of the job to engage in productive functions to enhance organizational effectiveness (Leithwood, Tomlinson, & Genge, 1996). It is this commitment from all involved that translates into school improvement and increased student achievement.

### **Principal as Authentic Leader**

The human side of principal leadership is evident in authentic leadership. “The true force that attracts others is the force of the heart” (Kouzes & Posner, 1987, p. 125).

The authentic leader inspires trust and that is the link between the leader and the school staff (Evans, 2001).

The literature on the roles of the principal supports an emphasis on instructional/learning leadership and transformational leadership. The literature also supports the principal leading as an authentic person. The principal leads in a social context where relationships and trust are essential to success.

### **CISA and the Role of the Principal**

The role of the principal who makes the decision to implement the CISA in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is primarily that of transforming state policy, created by legislators with a political agenda, into a reality for a school. The most active creators of educational reform are the state legislatures (Laitsch, 1999). The prolific creation of state policy is a reaction to the public perception that public schools are failing (Laitsch, 1999). The CISA has authorized a new type of school in response to the growing demand for alternative schools such as charter schools (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). “While educational policy is based on the reality of legislators, implementation of policy is dependent on the realities of educators” (Hope & Pigford, 2000, p. 44).

### **Prepare for the Change Process**

As the principal of a school begins to think about shifting from the current school status to becoming an innovation school, the change process must be uppermost in the principal’s mind. The principal needs to consider the actions that will be taken in the initiation, implementation, and continuation phases to “enhance the possibility of successful policy implementation” (Hope & Pigford, 2001, p. 44). “Like any innovation,

policy mandates in education are susceptible to the realities of the change process” (Hope & Pigford).

In the first stage of change, called initiation, the principal understands that change is a process over time, not one big step (Fullan, 2001). The process to make the change happen and develop the innovation school will take at least three to five years and maybe more (Fullan, 2001). It will be incumbent upon the principal to develop the plan with the understanding that change is not linear, moving seamlessly from one phase to the other, but that the change process is influenced by factors that may be unknown at the time the change process was developed (Fullan, 2001).

The second stage of the change process is implementation which is defined as “the process of putting into place an idea, program, or set of activities and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change” (Fullan, 2001, p. 69). Because change is “technically simple and socially complex,” the process becomes immeasurably more complicated when the committee members, teachers, community members, district personnel, superintendent, and others become involved in the process (Fullan).

The third stage of the change process is institutionalization or continuation (Fullan, 2001). In this stage, the plan must have the support of all of the stakeholders in order to be sustained over time. One of the key challenges to sustaining a reform is when there is turnover of school personnel. The principal must also be aware that there are problems inherent in the change process. Some of the key ones are the tendency to oversimplify the solution, the difficulty establishing effective processes that work in the new situation, and need to generate passion for the change (Fullan, 2001).



## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership**

The Institute of Educational Leadership (IEL) developed the School Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative. This initiative was created by a task force who came to the agreement that school systems must reinvent the role of the principal to meet the needs of schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (IEL, 2000). The initiative advocates that the role of a principal of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century school be that of a visionary leader, instructional leader, and community leader. These are precisely the roles that a principal will assume when leading a community to create an innovation school.

### **Develop a Shared Vision**

The principal will progress from thinking about the stages of the change process--initiation, implementation, and continuation--to developing a shared vision or shared covenant for the new school (Sergiovanni, 1990). The principal will work with the existing school community toward the goal of becoming an innovation school. As an authentic leader, the principal will bring energy and inspiration to the community (IEL, 2000).

The community has an important and stated role in the CISA that designates the community as a partner in developing the innovation school. Teachers are required by the CISA to demonstrate their support for developing an innovation school by a staff vote. Since the CISA enables the principal to advocate for additional funding for the innovation school, this is another reason that makes good community relations essential.

As the instructional and learning leader of the school, the principal will lead the school community in selecting the innovations that will be implemented in the innovation school. The principal will keep a relentless focus on teaching and learning and making

decisions based on research and data (IEL, 2000). The challenge for the school principal and the stakeholders will be to grow the shared vision for the innovation school from the CISA to a shared reality for academic success.

### **Implementation Tool**

The Colorado Department of Education published a guide for schools in 2010 called *Implementation of the Innovation Schools Act (CDE, 2010)*. The *Implementation of the Innovation Schools Act* guide contains details about the step-by-step process principals will go through to create the application for innovation status.

### **Conclusion**

In this literature review, I have provided a definition of innovation and change, provided a brief history of innovation and reform efforts, explored some of the current efforts at innovation in Colorado, examined the role of the principal, and analyzed the role of the principal in the implementation of the Colorado Innovations Schools Act of 2008. In Chapter III, I will describe the methodology of the study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. Chapter III begins with perspectives on the study, providing the researcher's stance. This is followed by the rationale for using a phenomenological qualitative approach for this study, the context of the study, a restatement of the research question, and a description of the participants, data collection, and data analysis. This chapter concludes with the assumptions and limitations of the study, and the trustworthiness of the study.

#### **Researcher Stance**

I begin this discussion by informing the reader about what I brought to the study and why this research is important to me. I believe that education is the key to success and happiness. I am currently a principal in Colorado, have been a teacher, and have worked as a central office administrator. I have experienced education from nearly every aspect, including my own education and that of my children. I have watched the reforms and innovations come and go over the years, implementing many of them in my own capacities.

Public education is now at a critical juncture. The goals of public education are to educate every student at the highest possible level, eliminate the academic achievement

gaps between students, and boost the high school graduation rates in Colorado and in the nation. An additional goal in Colorado is to eradicate the Colorado Paradox which is the contradiction between the number of highly education citizens in the state and the low number of students who attend and graduate from our colleges. Rather than importing a highly educated population as has been the case, the state of Colorado must reverse that trend and educate Colorado's citizens to those same high levels.

A principal makes many, many decisions each day. Some of the decisions are mundane and managerial, while others have far-reaching consequences for the stakeholders of the school. New reforms and innovations exist in the state of Colorado, including the CISA of 2008. As a life-long educator, I believe that educators will discover reforms and innovations that will help us achieve our goal of success for all students. As a principal, I am eager to learn if the CISA, a new policy, will lead us closer to a solution to the deep problems and challenges that the stakeholders in education face every day. Sustaining hope that the future will be bright for our students and finding solutions to the complex problems is essential to the work.

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Approach**

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore a relatively unknown subject about a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Other characteristics of qualitative research include gathering data in the research setting, creating general themes from the data, and focusing on individual meaning (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research

portrays the complexity of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). In this study, each of the 22 school settings is social, dynamic, and complex.

Phenomenology is the study of the way people give meaning to their lives (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). Phenomenological research involves getting to the core of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenology is a philosophy as well as a research method. The researcher brackets or sets aside her own experiences to understand those of the participants (Nieswiadomy, 1993).

Patton (2002) summarized the characteristics of the four major types of qualitative research approaches, including phenomenology, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory. He stated that for phenomenology, the research purpose is to describe a person's experiences of a phenomenon, the primary data collection method is to interview participants of a study, the data analysis approach is to determine meaning from interview statements, and the result is a narrative report that is rich in its description of the experience (Patton, 2002). This study incorporated these four major characteristics.

### **Context of the Study**

The context of this study consisted of each of the Colorado schools that became innovation schools in accordance with the CISA and the principals that led those schools to achievement of innovation status. The role of the principals was central to the application process, as well as in selecting the innovations that were implemented in the schools, gaining buy-in from the staff and students of the schools, receiving waivers from existing policies, and bringing in additional funding. The plan for this study was to interview principals who successfully took their schools through the application process and achieved innovation schools status.

I interviewed 10 school principals whose schools were granted innovation schools status. One of the participants did not have the title of *principal*. However, in order to maintain confidentiality, all of the school leaders will be referred to as principals. Four of the principals were from innovation elementary schools, one principal was from an innovation middle school, four principals were from innovation high schools, and one principal led the elementary, middle, and high schools in a school district. Interviewing principals at all three levels helped me understand the implementation of CISA across the Colorado K-12 educational system. The purpose of the interviews was primarily to gain an understanding of why the principals made the decision to become innovation schools. What was it about this new educational reform policy, CISA, that resonated so deeply with principals that they invested their time and resources to implement it?

Purposeful sampling is a “qualitative sampling procedure in which researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2008, p. 645). To achieve purposeful sampling in this study, I interviewed principals from each of the education levels--elementary, middle, and high school--resulting in 10 principal interviews.

Currently, 23 schools in three school districts in Colorado have been granted innovation status. There are three school districts in the state with innovation schools. Each school district was given a pseudonym to bring confidentiality to this study.

This study is important in helping to inform the local, state, and national conversation about a new educational reform. This research is important in determining whether this reform, CISA, helps close the academic achievement gaps and raises the

high school graduation rates in Colorado. It is also important to consider if this model might be replicated in other states.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this qualitative inquiry:

RQ1: What were the experiences and perceptions of the principals whose schools were granted innovative status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008?

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were 10 principals who wrote applications for innovation status after the CISA became law in 2008 and whose schools were granted innovation status. I selected four principals from the elementary school level, one from the middle school level, four from the high school level, and one from a K-12 district. The selection of the ten principals was made so that there was representation from as many of the three school districts that had innovation schools as possible. The selection was also based on finding principals who were willing to participate in the study. My goal was to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of elementary, middle, and secondary principals who decided to pursue innovation status.

It was possible that not all of the principals who initially created the applications were working at the innovation schools. For example, the principal at one of the high schools in a large urban school district that was granted innovation status in 2009 submitted his resignation in March of 2010 and left at the end of that school year. I located and interviewed this principal as one of the 10 participants. I hoped that an interview with a principal who had left an innovation school would offer a unique perspective and inform the research question.

### **Data Collection**

The methods of data collection to inform the research question were conducting interviews and completing document analyses. The first method used included face-to-face interviews with the ten school principals. The second method used in this research was conducting an analysis of the applications submitted by the schools that were granted innovation status.

### **Permission to Conduct Research**

Before the data were collected, this study followed the approval process of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Northern Colorado. In addition, an application to conduct research was submitted to each of the three school districts that had innovation schools. After receiving approval for the study, the interview process began.

### **Interview Process**

The purpose of the interview process was to produce data and information. There are three important areas to manage throughout the interviews: what was asked and how it was asked, the role of the interviewer and the interviewee, and recording and transcribing (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). A personal letter was sent to the 10 principals to provide information about the study and to invite them to consider participating in the study. The letter informed the principals that I would phone them within a week to invite them to participate in the study.

After determining which principals were interested in participating, I selected four principals from the elementary, one from the middle, three from the high school, and one from a K-12. I based my selection of the principals on the level of their school



(elementary, middle, or high school), on the fact that the principal wrote the application and gained innovation status at the school, and on including principals from all three school districts. After I selected the nine principals, I called them on the phone and sent an email via their work email to arrange a time and place for the first 45- to 60-minute interview. I assured the participants that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study and that each of the principals would be given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

At the start of each of the 10 semi-structured interviews, the principals were put at ease through casual, collegial conversation. Time constraints were honored, and a coffee gift card was offered to the participants at the end of each interview.

### **Interview Protocol**

I used an interview protocol during the first interview with the principals (see Appendix B). The protocol contained open-ended questions that provided the participants with opportunities to talk about their own unique experiences (Creswell, 2008). Open-ended questions are more investigative and seek to answer the research questions being studied (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). The role of the interviewer is to manage the interview process in a positive and professional manner (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). In addition, the interviewer must be a good listener and allow the interviewee to do the talking. Probing for further information, clarity, and details, and checking for understanding are also essential roles of the interviewer (Creswell, 2008). To prepare for the interviews, I conducted role-playing exercises to practice reading the questions and pace the entire interview so that it fit within the allotted time (Creswell, 2008).

The interviews were assigned an identifying code to protect confidentiality. The first round of interviews was digitally recorded, and I also took field notes and maintained a journal on key points during the interview. At the completion of the first interview, I scheduled a second interview with each of the 10 participants. The second interview was scheduled within 30 days of the first interview and was scheduled for a 45- to 60-minute time slot. The purpose of the second interview was to complete interactive member checking and get feedback about the coded transcripts as to whether my information seemed true to their interview responses. In addition to member checking, the purpose of the second interview was to discuss my impressions of the applications for each of the nine schools and the rural district. Between the first and second interviews, I read the applications for context. I coded the applications for principal voice then re-interviewed the principal about the presence or lack of his or her voice in the document.

I transcribed each of the interviews, keeping in mind the importance of confidentiality and ethics of the research. I prepared the transcriptions from the digital recorder after the interviews were complete. At that time, I coded the transcription of each interview. An interactive member checking process was achieved by sending the coded transcripts back to the participants in the study to confirm the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The digital recordings were stored in a locked drawer at my home, and I held the only key to the drawer. At the end of the study, the digital recordings were destroyed by the researcher.

A schedule for the first interview, second interview, and document analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Schedule for Principal Interviews and Document Analysis*

Principal No.	January	February	May	June
1	x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>		
2			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
3			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
4			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
5			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
6			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
7			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
8			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
9			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>
10			x <sup>1</sup>	x <sup>2</sup>

Note. x<sup>1</sup> = first interview; x<sup>2</sup> = second interview.

**Document Collection Process**

Each of the 23 Colorado schools that were granted innovation status was required to complete an application. The school applications to gain innovation status are currently located on the Colorado Department of Education website ([www.CDE.org](http://www.CDE.org)). I printed the applications that corresponded to the 10 principals that I interviewed and placed the copies in a three-ring binder. The names of the schools and the principals were deleted, and each school's or district's application was assigned a coded number. The coded number was written on a label placed on the cover sheet of the respective

school or district application. To maintain the confidentiality of each school or district, no other identifying information was written on the cover sheet.

The application for each of the schools and the district were read after the completion of the first interview and before the start of the second interview. I read each application for context then coded it for principal voice. After completing the member checking process in the second interview, I spoke with each principal about the presence or lack of his voice in the document. Constant comparative methodology was used to analyze the data consisted of “generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories” (Creswell, 2008, p. 637). The coding was used to obtain richer data in the second interview.

The three-ring binder containing the applications was kept in a locked drawer of my desk in my home, and I kept the only key to the drawer. Even though the applications are readily available to the public on the CDE website, the applications in the notebook were destroyed at the end of this study by shredding them in a paper shredder owned by the researcher.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

### **Interview Analysis**

“Data analysis begins while the interviewing is still underway” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 202). This means that each of the interviews may contain information that has striking similarities or differences. Each of the principal interviews in this study was unique, yet similar. After the digitally recorded interview transcriptions were coded and the member checking was complete, the data from all ten interviews were ready for

analysis. The data were open-coded through the process of reading, analyzing, and labeling the data. After coding the data, they were collapsed into themes. Finally, the total number of themes was reduced to five to seven themes, allowing for detailed information about a few themes, rather than general information about many themes (Creswell, 2008). A rich narrative discussion was written to report the findings and inform the research question. Dialogue and direct quotes from the original interviews were included in the narrative discussion.

### **Document Analysis**

A document analysis of the applications of each of the 10 schools being studied was conducted. Document analysis is “a form of qualitative research that requires readers to locate, interpret, analyze, and draw conclusions about the evidence presented” (Briggs & Coleman, 2007, p. 279). Briggs and Coleman state that documents serve as a voice for those who created them (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). In this study, the documents served as the voice of the school leaders who wrote the application for innovation status.

The 10 school applications of the 10 principals who were interviewed were read for context then coded for principal voice. The constant comparative methodology of coding was used to generate and connect categories “by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories” (Creswell, 2008, p. 637). The coding was used to obtain richer data during the second interview. The analysis informed the research question about the experiences and perceptions of the principals who applied for and were granted innovation status for their schools or district. At the completion of the document analysis, a final report was generated.

### **Categories of the Applications**

The applications for innovation school status consist of the following 10 categories:

1. Mission statement.
2. Innovations to be implemented.
3. Programs and policies affected by the innovations.
4. Expected improvements in academic achievement.
5. Cost savings and increased efficiencies.
6. Evidence of majority consent.
7. Evidence of community support.
8. Waivers needed from state and district policies.
9. Wavers needed from master agreements.
10. Additional information in the addendum.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

I made several assumptions throughout the study. For example, I assumed that the principals were honest in their interview responses and that the interviews would reveal five to seven common themes about which a rich narrative discussion would be created. I also assumed that the applications submitted by the principals to gain innovation status were accessible, thorough, and complete. These assumptions and others were made with positive intent.

The researcher must advance the limitations or weaknesses of the study (Creswell, 2008). One limitation of this study was the small number of schools that were granted innovation status. Another limitation was that the majority of the schools were in one

school district. The study was also limited because the CISA exists in only one state. In this qualitative study, I was aware of the need to set aside my personal history and experiences in order to more fully understand those of the participants (Nieswiadomy, 1993).

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used triangulation and member checking as the means by which I determined the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collection and data analysis in this study. Triangulation is an attempt to gain a true picture of a situation by looking at it from different findings (Silverman, 2000). Triangulation is also the process of corroborating evidence from different sources such as interviews and document analysis (Creswell, 2008). I searched for “convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). In this study, the triangulation included the data from the participant interviews, member checking of the interview data for accuracy, analysis of the documents, and finding common themes. The resulting narrative account “is valid because researchers go through this process and rely on multiple forms of evidence” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126).

Member checking was used in this study to confirm that the findings and interpretations were accurate. Member checking was accomplished through the process of interviewing and recording the responses of the participants, transcribing the interview information, coding the transcriptions, and discussing the coded transcriptions of the second interviews (Creswell, 2008). In addition, I maintained field notes and a researcher journal throughout the process.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I provided my perspectives on the study as the researcher's stance. This was followed by the rationale for using a phenomenological qualitative approach for this study, the context of the study, a restatement of the research question, and a description of the participants, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concluded with the assumptions and limitations of the study and the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter IV will include a discussion of the findings of the study.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

I will include in this chapter a discussion about the findings of the research and the processes used to generate, gather, and record data. I will explain the systems used for keeping track of data and the understandings that emerged. I will also discuss the findings in relation to the research question in a rich narrative that includes direct quotes from the individual interviews. The final part of this chapter will consider the evidence of quality that shows how this study followed procedures to assure accuracy of the data.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act (CISA) of 2008. To begin building this understanding, I conducted individual interviews with ten principals who had been involved in the process of writing an application to become an innovation school, presenting to the local and state school boards to request innovation status, and implementing the innovation plan after innovation status was awarded.

The participants in the study consisted of four women and six men. Four of the principals led elementary schools, one led a K-8 school, four principals led high schools, and one led a K-12 school. I have provided a pseudonym for each participant in order to maintain his or her confidentiality. In addition, each school name has also been assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Table 4 provides a brief demographic profile of

each of the participating schools and the rural district. To protect confidentiality, I am not using specific numbers.

Table 4

*Demographics of Participating Schools and the Rural District 2010*

School/District	Fall 2010 Enrollment Rate	Percentage Poverty Rate	Percentage Minority	Percentage English Language Learners	Percentage Students with Special Needs	Location
Galaxy Elementary	475-485	87-97	87-97	50-60	5-15	Large urban district
Nebula Elementary	595-605	65-75	87-97	25-35	10-20	Large urban district
Comet Elementary	365-375	70-80	75-85	45-55	10-20	Large urban district
Meteor Elementary	470-480	60-70	60-70	20-30	5-15	Large urban district
Shooting Star K-8	680-690	87-97	87-97	40-50	10-20	Large urban district
Celestial High School	800-810	85-95	90-99	20-30	10-20	Large urban district

Table 4 (continued)

School/District	Fall 2010 Enrollment Rate	Percentage Poverty Rate	Percentage Minority	Percentage English Language Learners	Percentage Students with Special Needs	Location
Nova High School	340-350	85-95	90-99	10-20	10-20	Large urban district
Zodiac High School	1130-1140	50-60	45-55			Large urban district
Constellation School District	300-320	0-10	0-10	0-10	0-10	Small rural district

Note: Data retrieved from: [www.ednewscolorado.org/2010/12/08/11217](http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2010/12/08/11217)

In addition to the demographics for each school and the small rural district provided in Table 4, I have given a brief profile of each school and the rural district. To protect confidentiality, the profiles use pseudonyms for the schools.

Galaxy Elementary was a school in a large urban district that began working on the concept of becoming an innovation school two years before receiving innovation status. The number of emerging bilingual students had increased significantly at the school, and the achievement level was low. The goal of the innovation plan was to develop biliterate students. The process to achieve the goal included developing common beliefs among the staff about second language learning, providing professional development in the use of specific instructional strategies, and implementing and

monitoring the instructional strategies. Waiving the teacher contract was not part of the school innovation plan.

Nebula Elementary was a school in a large urban district that had a history of low academic achievement and student enrollment. The culture of the school was in need of improvement such that all students and staff felt safe and respected. Bullying and fighting were occurring, and the suspension rate was high. The goals of the innovation plan were to implement a curriculum and specific instructional strategies that met the needs of the students, and to build a safe school environment with high expectations for student behavior and learning. The plan included adding time to the school year and day. The teacher contract was waived which resulted in the teachers becoming at-will employees.

Comet Elementary was a low-achieving school in a large urban district struggling to meet the academic needs of the students. The goal of the innovation plan was to develop an exemplary dual-language program and to incorporate assessments and data to lead instruction. The use of data to make instructional decisions, determine flexible groupings, and monitor student progress was emphasized. The teacher contract was waived, and the teachers became at-will employees.

Meteor Elementary was a school in a large urban district that had a toxic culture and low student achievement at the time the innovation plan was developed. The goals of the innovation plan were to increase expectations for students by differentiating instruction, designate the hiring of staff to the school, and expect the staff to model professionalism in all areas. Teachers at Meteor also waived the teacher contract and became at-will employees.

Shooting Star K-8 was a failing school in a large urban district that experienced several unsuccessful attempts at reform. The goals of the innovation plan were to: (a) provide a building leadership team with the flexibility to select, hire, and evaluate quality staff; (b) develop effective instructional practices that met the needs of the students; and (c) provide more time for learning. The teacher contract was waived, and the teachers became at-will employees.

Celestial High School was a low-performing school in a large urban district with significant student behavior issues. Respect between the students and staff was nonexistent. The goals of the innovation plan were comprehensive in scope, including the achievement of curriculum autonomy, effective instruction and intervention, extended calendar and schedule, control of hiring decisions, and a new governance structure. The teachers employed at the time that innovation status was approved were working under the district teacher contract. Teachers hired after the designation of innovation status became at-will employees.

Zodiac High School was a low-performing school in a large urban district. The goals of the innovation plan were to create learning academies, offer a freshman preparation program, provide college preparatory programs, and use data to monitor progress at all levels. Student engagement was an essential component. The teachers operated under the district contract.

Nova High School was a low-performing school in a large urban district. The goals of the innovation plan were to control the hiring decisions of the staff, develop courses to meet the needs of students, make scheduling decisions, have access to

resources, and implement a participatory leadership model. The teacher contract was waived, and the teachers became at-will employees.

Constellation School District is a rural district that is isolated from a large urban environment. The distance from a city where there is an available work force from which to hire staff was the challenge faced by the school district. The goal of the innovation plan was to gain flexibility in hiring, evaluating, and retaining qualified staff members. The teacher contract was not waived, and teachers operated under the district contract. I have provided a summary of the school profiles in Table 5.

Table 5

*Profiles of Participating Schools and the Rural District*

School/District	Leader	Innovation Plan Focus	Goal
Galaxy Elementary	Rose	Consistent instruction for second-language learners	Meet needs of ELLs & maintain home language
Nebula Elementary	Jackson	Select curricula & train teachers	Engage and motivate students
Comet Elementary	Daniel	Dual language & use of assessments and data	Informed decision making
Meteor Elementary	Caroline	Make hiring decisions	Hire the best staff
Shooting Star K-8	Hillary	Leadership team makes hiring & evaluation decisions	Team decision making
Celestial High School	David	High expectations for learning	Focus staff on student achievement
Zodiac High School	Ben	Establish learning academies	Increase graduation rates & reduce dropout rates
Nova High School	Adam	Use of decision making model	Access to resources in order to meet goals
Constellation School District	Winston	Hire & retain staff	Alternative approach to hiring

Note: School Innovation Plans at [www.cde.org](http://www.cde.org).



## **Findings**

Education reform in the United States is in need of school reform models that produce the desired result of increasing academic achievement. New school reform models are moving away from centralized school districts and toward decentralized, autonomous models such as charter schools and innovation schools. Evidence is lacking regarding the effectiveness of innovation schools.

The research question for the study was:

What are the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008?

In the context of the problem, the purpose, and the research question of this study, a discussion of the findings follows.

As a result of analyzing over 200 pages of transcribed data generated by the individual interviews conducted across Colorado, seven key themes emerged as products of the interview questions. The themes that emerged were: (a) why schools decided to seek innovation status, (b) how the innovation school applications were created, (c) generating support for the innovation plans, (d) impact of innovation status on school culture, (e) operating with autonomy from local and state constraints, (f) staying focused on student achievement, and (g) reflecting on next steps for innovation schools. The rich narrative that follows will explore the seven key themes and include direct quotes from the participants. At the beginning of the narrative, I will provide a summary of the overall findings in relation to the research question.

**Overall Findings: The Experiences and Perceptions of School Principals**

The experiences of the participants in the research study to gain innovation status and implement the School Innovation Plan occurred over a 3- year cycle. The experiences can be considered as occurring in three stages traversed by the participants within that three-year cycle: (a) development, (b) implementation, and (c) continuous improvement. A visual representation of the three-stage process is illustrated in Figure 1.

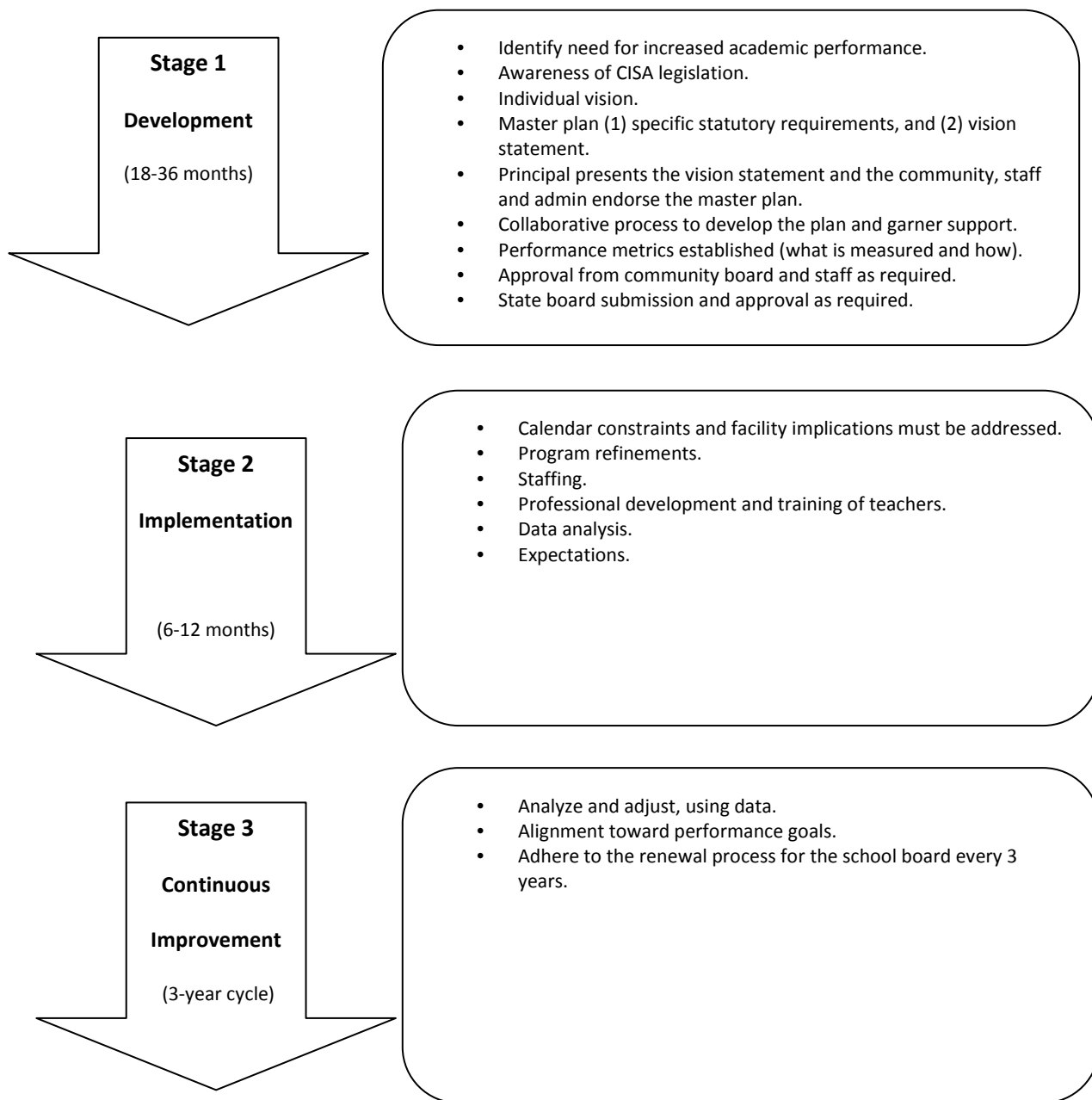


Figure 1. CISA stages of development, implementation, and improvement.

In the development stage, which lasted between 18 and 36 months, the principals experienced an immersion in understanding the CISA, imagining a broad vision for the school community, and developing a broad master plan that included specific statutory requirements and a vision statement. Next, the participants refined the broad master plan of their vision for implementing CISA with the school community, staff, and district administrators for endorsement. This was followed by a collaborative process led by the leadership teams at each of the innovation schools to share the plans with the staff and larger school community, gain approval, deepen the understanding, and ignite the passion to achieve the goals related to academic achievement for the students in the schools. After gaining staff and community support, the principals presented the plans for support and approval to the local and state school boards.

In the implementation stage, which lasted between 6 and 12 months, the principals reported first addressing any calendar changes and facility implications that were identified in the innovation plans. Next, the innovation plans were refined, the teachers were hired, and professional development was underway. A thorough understanding of the School Innovation Plan was provided, and expectations were established for all of the stakeholders. During this implementation stage, the performance goals were refined. The school faculties and communities were aware of the new directions in which they were heading and the progress monitoring that would take place along the way.

In the continuous improvement stage, which lasted three years, the principals monitored the progress of staff and students toward the performance goals identified in the master plan. The CISA requires that innovation schools submit a renewal plan every three years. This is the stage of analyzing and adjusting using data.

Identifying the three stages of CISA helped build an understanding of the difficult and complex work undertaken by the principals who were interviewed for this research study. Two of the schools that participated in the study were in the process of writing the renewal plans at the time of the interviews. The CISA also encourages schools and districts to expand the use of accountability measures to more accurately capture student achievement.

There were barriers along the way for nearly every principal. Some of the barriers included:

1. Resistance from parents, teachers, or community members.
2. Pressure from local teacher unions to back away from waiving the collective bargaining agreements.
3. A lack of responsiveness from the central office of the school district.
4. The amount of paperwork and planning required.
5. The lack of autonomy to make decisions such as hiring and evaluating staff.
6. Access to resources promised to the school.
7. Selecting curriculum not approved by the school district.

The freedoms and accomplishments reported by the principals were found in identifying the needs of the students and tailoring the innovations to the needs of their schools. There were a variety of innovations and waivers selected for each school. Waiving collective bargaining occurred in nearly all of the schools. The one elementary school in the study that did not waive the teacher contract acted because the teachers did not agree to become at-will employees, and that would have prevented the innovation plan from going forward. The principal chose the innovations over the teacher contract

issue in order to, ultimately, become an innovation school. Each principal experienced and perceived similar dilemmas and made choices and decisions for the good of their schools.

The perceptions from the participants as they reflected on the work were, for the most part, positive. Some of the positive perceptions reported about implementing CISA were that it was an exciting challenge, provided flexibility and autonomy, gave a rural district a positive solution to the hiring dilemma, changed toxic cultures, and offered hope for a new model of reform. Some of the negative perceptions reported about implementing CISA were that the district did not have the capacity to support innovation schools, resources were not made available to schools, another bureaucracy was created within a district bureaucracy just for innovation schools, the lack of sustainability, the limited number of innovation schools in the state, and the absence of true instructional innovation in the school plans.

The ultimate goals of the CISA are to increase academic achievement, increase graduation rates, and eliminate the achievement gap between groups of students (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Many of the experiences and perceptions reported by principals were messages of hope and commitment to the work of creating better schools for students. The principals envisioned schools that were student centered where students were engaged in the learning, held to high expectations, supported by adults who cared about them, encouraged to pursue their passions, held accountable for their own learning, and prepared to go to college or pursue other dreams. All of the participants were working to make this vision a reality for their students. The principals experienced the challenges

and successes of leading an innovation school and perceived the opportunities and possibilities for a model for school reform.

The themes that emerged from the data are structured around the experiences and the perceptions of the participants throughout the process of gaining innovation status, implementing the School Innovation Plans, and preparing for next steps. The experiences of the principals provided information and insight about why they went through the process. The perceptions of the principals provided information and insight as principals reflected on the experiences and the merit of becoming an innovation school and implementing the School Innovation Plans.

Identifying the three stages of CISA helps build an understanding and provide a context for the work undertaken by the principals that were interviewed for this study. Within this context, the following seven themes emerged from the data: (a) why schools decided to seek innovation status, (b) how the innovation school applications were created, (c) generating support for the innovation plans, (d) impact of innovation school status on school cultures, (e) gaining autonomy from local and state constraints, (f) staying focused on student achievement, and (g) reflections on next steps for innovation schools.

**Why schools decided to seek innovation status.** There was one overarching reason for the principals to seek innovation status for the schools. That reason was to transform the low-achieving schools to high-achieving. The specific goals of the innovation plans of the participants in the study and the pseudonyms of the schools pursuing the goals are given below.

1. Consistent philosophy and instructional strategies for second-language learners with the goal of retaining the home language. This goal was set by Galaxy Elementary.
2. Selecting curricula to meet the needs of students and teacher training with the new materials with the goal of engaging and motivating students. This goal was established by Nebula Elementary.
3. Creating a special program and using assessments and data to guide instruction with the goal of making data informed instructional and grouping decisions. This goal was set by Comet Elementary.
4. Making hiring and evaluation decisions with the goal of eliminating teacher placement. This goal was established by Meteor Elementary and Nova High School.
5. Establishing learning academies with high expectations for students with the goal of increased graduation rates and eliminating drop outs. This goal was set by Zodiac High School.
6. Making hiring and evaluation decisions as a leadership team with the goal of retaining only excellent staff. This goal was set by Shooting Star K-8.
7. Embracing high expectations for student achievement with the goal of increased graduation rates and eliminating drop outs. This goal was set by all three high schools: Celestial, Zodiac, and Nova.
8. Developing a decision-making model with the goal of staying true to the beliefs, values, and goals of the leadership team. This goal was set by Nova High School.
9. Hiring and retaining staff in a rural district with the goal of having flexibility and increasing the hiring pool. This goal was set by Constellation School District.



Achieving academic success in the schools was the broad reasons for gaining innovation status for the participants in the study.

**How the innovation school applications were created.** The CISA provides for innovation status for a public school, a group of public schools, and an entire public school district (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). The process to gain innovation status begins with a public school creating an innovation plan that is both an application for innovation status and a planning guide to increase academic achievement or achieve other goals. A group of schools may submit a plan to create an Innovation School Zone which consists of schools in a school district that share common interests such as location or educational focus and serve the same elementary and secondary students (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Also, a District of Innovation can be created when an entire district seeks designation for all of the schools.

The principals who participated in this research study had achieved innovation school status for each of the schools. I will discuss how the applications were created to gain innovation status for the schools. The principals led a collaborative process to create the innovation plans. The principals at several of the innovation schools wrote the draft of the plan, while other principals provided support and built capacity for the development of the plan. Jackson, the principal of Nebula Elementary, explained:

I wrote the draft and brought in key components of the leadership team, the assistant principal, five teachers I selected, community members, and parents. I spent two days in my house alone with the phone off. I looked at all the components of innovation, put up chart paper everywhere, and started building my plan.

Rose, the principal of Galaxy Elementary, also wrote the draft of the innovation plan and experienced an “unanticipated benefit of developing the plan.” Rose stated:

I did most of the writing. I would run the plan through the committee. My downfall was not running this past the staff as often as I should. The plan has to go through the whole staff from the beginning. There were only teachers. It was an instructional decision, so I did not have the community on the committee. It was very bonding. It was an unanticipated benefit of developing this plan.

Adam, the principal of Nova High School, also wrote the draft of the innovation plan and was particularly interested in creating the school plan from a policy perspective.

Adam considered himself the lead architect on the innovation plan and he observed:

I sat down and cranked out the whole draft by myself, the parts that were related to the school. That was my job as the principal. I took it upon myself as the lead architect. Our team was everybody on the staff. We did not yet have a leadership team. The faculty looked at the part that related to them.

Caroline, the principal of Meteor Elementary, used a similar approach with her team of teachers, parents, and a school district advisor. Caroline stated:

My leadership team was about five people that were coming up with the language. We would come up with the stuff, then go out, then come up with the stuff and go out. It was very back and forth, very iterative. We would do a little bit of work, then I would gather the information and go back to the staff. I remember that I wanted it to be so interactive for them.

David, the principal of Celestial High School, faced a challenging beginning at the school. In order to develop the innovation plan and implement the changes that he envisioned, David began working with the staff a year in advance of applying for innovation status. David reported:

I walked into a hornet's nest. The school was considered one of the worst in the nation. Our team planned from a year out. We had a nomination process. There were 14-15 people on the committee, and their peers nominated each other. I was part of it, but I did not lead it. They selected a facilitator and a leader that would carry this process. There were also community members, parents, paras, students, and teachers. We brainstormed the things that were holding us back. There were six areas such as schedules and seat time. We appointed subcommittee chairs to bring in other people. They met with their subgroups that were not on the leadership team. They came back and shared with the leadership team, then we discussed what they had learned. The layers got messy since people had their own agendas. We needed a whole year.

In one of the school districts, the plan started with a district-level committee. A teacher and community group at Zodiac High School joined the district committee.

Maria explained:

For us, it started with us looking at other school models. The district was looking at creating an elitist program for some kids, rather than a whole school plan. It moved to the district level because we wanted to focus on the whole school population.

Daniel, the principal at Comet Elementary, had a vision for an innovation school about a year before talking about it with the staff. Daniel had a background in charter schools and wanted to apply that experience to the current school. Daniel reported:

I pulled a small group of teachers aside and posed the question: What would it take to shoot for the stars at our school and just go for it without any excuses? It was a group of people I knew would be excited about the question. Then I posed the question: What is standing in our way? We walked about those barriers. Then I introduced the idea of innovation and autonomy.

In one of the school districts, hiring competent teachers who would remain in the teaching positions over time was a major challenge. The school district did not have a pool of teachers from which to select candidates because of the distance of the district from a larger community. Winston said: “I called the staff together and asked if they would support an innovation plan with multiple year contracts, waivers from licensing, and tenure guidelines. We sent the information out to every staff member.”

“Reform fatigue” was a phrase used by Hillary, the principal at Shooting Star K-8, to describe all of the changes that had taken place at the school. The school had already written and implemented an academic plan six months before the innovation law passed. Now, the school staff had to decide whether or not to create and implement another new plan to become an innovation school. Hillary explained:

Now we needed to come back to see what was going well, what was on target, and what was not working well. So we put together a team to do action research such as monkey surveys to different stakeholders. We had to get out of the gate fast. We had to do it quick, and there was not a lot of prep time. We were moving in a difficult situation, but we had to have that sense of hope and possibility. I empowered my people who are in the classroom. We started moving forward, got the vote, and we were getting it rolling.

In addition to leading the school staff in writing the innovation application, Rose, the principal at Galaxy Elementary, reported collaborating about instructional decisions for the school. Rose said:

I selected English language teachers who do instruction in Spanish and talked about different philosophies. Everyone was teaching ELA differently. Some teachers were putting students into English immediately in first grade, and then they were going back to Spanish, and then the children were confused by third grade. We looked at our second-language learners and students. We wanted to meet the needs of our students and maintain their native language if possible.

Jackson, the principal at Nebula Elementary, reported finding research-based programs and materials to meet the needs of students. Jackson stated:

As a leader, you know what the kids need. The plan gives you the opportunity to find the best curricula. The leadership team has high expectations and will accept nothing less. Once kids believe that people believe in them, they will do anything in the world for you.

For Ben, the principal at Zodiac High School, collaboration with the leadership team to make systemic and deep instructional changes was centered on student engagement. Ben told a story about a student who loved to sing to illustrate his point:

I came here to help the academies get going. Our kids were not prepared for these because we were failing so many kids, so our work for two years has been to get math and science for all kids. There was a time when I went out on the quad, and there was a student out there singing in a great voice. I asked him why he was not singing in our choral group. The songs were traditional, and the student did not want to sing in the choral group because of the songs they were doing. Engagement is the key thing.

The innovation school applications were created through a collaborative process. The principals led the collaborative process. Several principals of innovation schools

wrote the draft of the plan, while other innovation school principals provided support and built capacity for the development of the plan.

**Generating support for the innovation plans.** Generating support for the innovations plans included several strategies: getting a majority vote of approval from the staff, flexibility, trust, shared leadership, and personal courage. After the innovation plans were finalized at each of the schools, a staff show of support was required by the CISA. The school staff is required to demonstrate support for becoming an innovation school with a majority vote of approval (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Table 6 identifies the results of the voting from each of the innovation schools in the study and indicates that there was a majority vote in favor of becoming an innovation school with an average approval vote of 77.4%.

Table 6

*Result of Staff Vote for Innovation Status*

School/District	Vote
Galaxy Elementary	98%
Nebula Elementary	94%
Comet Elementary	88%
Meteor Elementary	91%
Shooting Star K-8	70%
Celestial High School	70%
Nova High School	92%
Zodiac High School	71%
Constellation School District	100%

Why did some schools receive nearly 100% support for innovation status, while other schools barely achieved the majority vote required? The answer appears to be that the vote at each school was unique to the circumstances of each site. I will discuss the results of the staff vote at each of the sites and a possible reason for why the votes resulted in the recorded percentages.

Galaxy Elementary did not waive the teacher contract because, as Rose reported, they were not willing to do so. It seems logical to conclude that the 98% vote in support of innovation school status was easy to obtain because the teacher contract was not under consideration. At Nebula Elementary, Jackson hired 34 new staff members, so the vision to become an innovation school was in place as the teachers joined the staff. There was

one group at Nebula that was not new to the building, and Jackson reported that group was the area of resistance to innovation school status. The result of the vote at Nebula was still 94%. At Comet Elementary, Daniel had a very smooth transition to innovation status, partly because he had supportive teachers who helped lead the process. The result of the vote at Comet was 88%.

At Meteor Elementary, Caroline reported that the teachers came to their own conclusion about becoming an innovation school. The teachers were frustrated about the hiring process and the placement of teachers at their school without an interview and a consensus about hiring the candidate. CISA was a vehicle for them to take ownership for the hiring process, and the 91% vote reflects the high level of support. At the K-8 school, Shooting Star, Hillary reported that reform fatigue had been occurring over a long period of time. The school had implemented another reform plan just before CISA was enacted, so the teachers were concerned about developing and committing to a second reform plan so soon. Hillary stated that the 70% vote barely passed, and reform fatigue is probably a good reason.

At Celestial High School, David reported that student achievement had not been the focus of the staff. The reluctance David encountered to become an innovation school was overcome when the principal informed the teachers that the principal would grandfather the current teachers into the existing teacher contract and not make the teachers at-will employees. The resulting vote at Celestial was 70%. David moved the conversation from a focus on the teachers to a focus on the students and academic achievement. The reluctance garnered a 70% vote.

At Nova High School, Adam reported that 92% of the teachers were in agreement with becoming an innovation school because the teachers were also grandfathered into the district contract. The vote at Zodiac High School was not nearly as high as the other high schools. Ben reported that teachers were focused on the classes the teachers had developed and taught over the years and that there was a reluctance to change. The teachers did not do away with the district contract, but the disconnect between the needs of the teachers and the focus on student achievement resulted in a 71% vote for approval.

In the Constellation School District, Winston had an opportunity to garner support from the stakeholders in the district. Winston built a supportive vote from the school board and the district teachers of 100% after clarifying that the purpose of finding and retaining qualified staff and not to taking away the existing teacher contract.

During the individual interviews with the participants, several principals talked about strategies that were implemented in order to generate support for the innovation plan. The four strategies that emerged were flexibility, building trust, empowering teachers, and courage.

Rose was concerned about the staff at Galaxy Elementary supporting the concept of becoming an innovation school. Rose knew that the teachers were watching to see if changes to the plan would be made if the changes were requested by the staff. Rose said, “One of the biggest challenges was you have to be flexible with staff. This was important because we did change the plan. Actions speak louder than words. The community trusts us to make the right decisions and do what is best for our kids.”

Building trust was identified by the several of the participants as important to generating support. Jackson, the principal at Nebula Elementary, said, “I needed people



to trust me. I used my prior experiences and brought credibility that what I was doing was working.”

David, the principal at Celestial High School, reported, “They had to trust me as I guided them.”

Winston, the school leader in Constellation School District, explained there is a high level of trust and understanding between the school board and the staff.

Several principals in the study stated the belief that empowering the teachers was important to generating support. David, the principal at Celestial High school, said:

I began by empowering teachers to make decisions. Teachers say that they want to be included in making decisions, but when it comes down to it, they really do not. I said, ‘No, if you want to be involved, we are going to grapple with the tough things.’ That is the how and the why of what this means. We will hold everyone accountable.

Hillary, the principal at Shooting Star K-8, added, “I empower my people who are in the classroom.”

Adam, the principal at Nova High School, shared, “The principal empowers the workforce to meet the needs of students.”

Caroline, the principal at Meteor Elementary, felt that generating support for the plan resulted from staying true to her own values and beliefs which included a shared leadership approach with the staff. Caroline declared:

At the end of the day, I was not willing to compromise my integrity or values to defend policies and procedures that would not ensure and guarantee that I was doing the very best for my kids. My motivations were always driven by what was best for our kids and how could I ensure that we had shared leadership in the school.

On the first day as principal at Celestial High School, David knew a very challenging job was ahead of him. Student misbehavior was rampant, and there was no

respect between the staff and the students. David spoke eloquently about the courage that was required to accept the challenge of this difficult situation. As David spoke, it was clear that the rivers ran deep for this principal. David said:

I found the courage to take on this challenge. I come from not having the lens of being a traditional educator. I hold the belief that you go get things done. It is kind of messy, but I have learned. I knew some of the conversations would be hard, but I would not let the opportunity go by just because it was uncomfortable. You cannot be afraid.

Generating support for the innovation plans was essential for the schools and the rural district. Generating support included getting a majority vote of approval from the staff, flexibility, trust, shared leadership, and personal courage.

**Impact of innovation school status on school cultures.** A change in the culture in each of the innovation schools and rural school district was reported by the participants. The participants in the interviews were open about the changes innovation school status brought to the school and district cultures. For Rose, there was a vast change at Galaxy Elementary:

Our school culture has vastly changed. We are all on the same page instructionally. We love each other. I would go through the process again because of the culture it created. We now have common instructional practices. I hired an outside consultant to help with all of this. He is really good with building culture. It was super helpful. It was not just coming from me.

In a similar report, Jackson described having no culture at Nebula Elementary before being designated an innovation school. After becoming an innovation school, the school culture made all of the difference. Jackson observed:

There has been a huge change in our school culture. Last year, we had 38 suspensions, and this year we had six. Our school culture was key. There was no culture. Kids were fighting, and we really focused on that. Nothing was ever done. The parent culture has improved significantly.

Changing the school culture was the work of the principal, Daniel, at Comet Elementary even before the school gained innovation status. When the school did receive innovation status, it gave them attitude. Daniel explained:

This is my fifth year, so what I was doing was changing the school culture. Innovation status gave us attitude. This is our school and we are going to do what we need to do. It really gave us a shot in the arm. I told our teachers that we were going to stop asking for permission and just do it.

For Hillary, the focus was squarely on the culture from the beginning. Shooting Star K-8 had experienced failure for a long time, and new reforms came and went without sustained success. Hillary described the change:

The school has had lots of failure and reform fatigue. I asked my staff to think differently about assessment, culture, or schedule, maybe they need more time. We were focused on our community. People love to work at our school now because we are top dog. People who are here for four years have earned the right to be here.

David reported that moving from one of the worst schools in America to one of the best in the district was a major achievement for Celestial High School. Academic and behavioral successes were part of the changes in the school culture. David told me:

Our school was considered one of the worst in America. We supported the kids who needed it both in academics and behavior. Student may have a tough veneer, so we have to find out what they need. The behaviors went away quickly. People walked through our halls and were amazed at what they saw.

The changes in school culture were tangible for Caroline after achieving innovation status. Caroline helped the staff become clear about shared values and beliefs through conversations. As a result, the staff at Meteor Elementary was pulling collaboratively in the same direction. Caroline related:

Through the conversations we had to have to get ourselves to innovation status, it just aligned our values as a staff and made it very clear what we were there to do. It opened up a lot of conversations about how we were going to get to where we were empowering people to make decisions. There is a tangible feel to innovations schools, something different. It goes back to the culture and the

relationships that are developed. It is a mechanism to bring things into alignment because you are having difficult conversations, and you are having to share your values. We are just all pulling on one rope, and instead of pulling against each other, we were all pulling together on this. For me, this is where I started. I was in a very toxic environment. It took me three years to get to the place where we would not yell at each other. You cannot expect the kids to behave better than the grownups.

Another dramatic change in school culture took place at Zodiac High School.

Ben was compelled to set the direction for the school because a direction did not exist. The graduation testimonials from students attested to the new and improved culture at the school. Ben stated:

School culture has changed dramatically. I am just talking about when I first got here. I could not tell what drove the ship as far as a staff focus. The students remarked this spring in their graduation speeches that our school is now safe, they are going on to college, and our culture is now about kids.

The impact on the culture of each of the schools was dramatic. The principals reported impressive changes in the schools' cultures and attributed the changes to the deep conversations between staff members as they clarified the mission, beliefs, values, and vision for the innovation plans and the implementation of the plans. Improving the school cultures was a positive consequence of achieving innovation status.

**Operating with autonomy from local and state constraints.** The fifth theme that emerged from the interviews was operating with autonomy from local and state constraints. Operating with the autonomy to make decisions tailored to the needs of the school and community is one of the purposes of the CISA, with the ultimate purpose of increasing academic achievement (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Autonomy is discussed and even encouraged at the beginning of CISA:

While the ultimate responsibility for controlling the instruction in public schools continues to lie with the school district Board of Education of each public school, each school district Board of Education is strongly encouraged to delegate to each

public school a high degree of autonomy in implementing curriculum, making personnel decision, organizing the school day, determining the most effective use of resources, and generally organizing the delivery of high-quality educational services, thereby empowering each public school to tailor services most effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of the population of students it serves. (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008)

It is stated in the CISA that one of the purposes is to improve educational performance through greater individual school autonomy and managerial flexibility (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). The CISA also states that another purpose is to hold public schools that receive greater autonomy under this article accountable for student achievement as measured by the state assessment program (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Making autonomy an integral part of the CISA sets the expectation for school leaders that the mission of achieving innovation status will be done with school and leadership autonomy.

All of the participants talked about the need to be released from the barriers and the bureaucracies that stood in the way of the changes needed for the schools. The participants also spoke of the need for personal freedom to make decisions as leaders. The notion of autonomy came up in the first interview that I conducted. It was raised as a key question when Rose asked: “The scores were mandating that we do something different. Did we want it done to us, or do we know what our students need?”

As the principals took on the challenges to lead a school to innovation status, the concept of autonomy became central. Jackson was able to fundamentally change Nebula Elementary by hiring a new staff and bringing in research-based curricula to meet the needs of the students. Jackson said, “I was excited for the opportunity for autonomy which is critical and key for the success in an innovation school. As a leader, you know what the kids need. I got to hire my own staff, 34 teachers, brand new.”

Daniel was interested in removing the barriers that prevented Comet Elementary from achieving at high levels. Daniel looked at other schools to get a sense of the possibilities for his school. Daniel wanted to build that sense of excitement with the staff. Daniel explained:

I had been aware of another district school and the autonomy they gained. I was really interested in that. Becoming an innovation school seemed like it was a tool that would give us more freedom. Lots of the barriers reside in the district and bureaucracy in which we work. I introduced the idea of innovation and autonomy to my staff. It was pretty clear that innovation would address the barriers that existed. We were excited about it.

The school district was working with Hillary on the idea of developing an innovation school at Shooting Star K-8. Hillary was also interested in breaking down barriers to success and was willing to be held more accountable to meet the needs of students. That vision was realized in the idea of becoming an innovation school. Hillary said:

The district leaders were really saying that maybe if we hold schools accountable, and maybe if we hold them even more accountable, we will let them have more autonomy, and this is the reason we will let them have more autonomy. The schools can start breaking down the barriers and the handcuffs. They came and told me about CISA. That was exactly what we wanted to do.

David believed that operating with autonomy would be the result of gaining innovation status at Celestial High School. The vision resided in the belief that innovation status would bring the changes that were needed at the school. David reported, "Applying for innovation status was about autonomy and what it was going to do for our school."

For Adam, autonomy was a means to an end. Adam saw autonomy as the pathway to change for Nova High School. Adam indicated, "Autonomy was the impetus for becoming an innovation school."

Caroline felt so strongly about the concept of autonomy that she believed the CISA should have been named the Autonomous Schools Act instead of the Innovation Schools Act. Caroline believed that autonomy was at the heart of the change that could happen at Meteor Elementary. Caroline observed:

At that time, probably 18 months before the innovation law passed, I was having conversations with a variety of people in the district about how we could operate with more autonomy at the school level. Selfishly, I wanted to be in charge of my own destiny. I wish the law was not called Innovations Schools Act. It is not about innovation. If what you are doing is innovative because it is different than the way the rest of the district operates, that is how you define innovative then we have a problem. Because it is different. It is almost like the Autonomous Schools Act. That is what it really is. You are implying that what schools are doing is innovative or different because they are doing it differently than the rest of the district. But that does not mean innovative in terms of it being radically different and transformative.

In addition to the belief that the name of the bill should have been the Autonomous Schools Act, Caroline introduced a new concept into the conversation. The new concept was earned autonomy verses granted autonomy. Caroline continued: “There is merit in autonomous empowerment at the site level. Earned autonomy verses grant autonomy is something else to dig into. ISA is granted autonomy, and it is how the district chose to define it.”

Winston, from Constellation School District, was empowered to lead when his district decided not to accept the Title II funding for his district in order to take control of professional development in the district. Winston observed, “We were pretty independent because we did not take the Title II money. We could set up our own guidelines about who to hire and what we wanted our professional development to be.”

Operating with autonomy was a key goal for the principals. The promise of autonomy is clear in the CISA, and the purpose for autonomy enables innovation plans to

be tailored to the needs of the students in the innovation schools. The principals were not interested in autocracy or dictatorships. On the contrary, principals wanted to be empowered and to empower the schools to make shared decisions that would benefit student achievement.

**Staying focused on student achievement.** The sixth theme that emerged from the individual interviews was staying focused on academic achievement. Increasing academic achievement is the purpose of the CISA. Conversely, there are only two reasons that innovation for a district would be denied by the state board, and these are a likely decrease in academic achievement and a lack of fiscal feasibility (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008).

Engagement was the key to the vision for academic achievement at Zodiac High School where Ben was the principal. Ben acknowledged that it was a low-performing school as evidenced by the data. The graduation rate was also low, and so were the expectations for student performance. Ben described:

We were a low-performing school, and we wanted to see how we could engage students. The school did not focus on the students in the past. The staff did not focus on students. Historic data showed that achievement was low. We wanted to market the very best teachers. Kids need to have a connection with you and know they like you and care about you. Failure was rampant, and students were planning to go to college. Our graduation rate is high now. Our work for two years has been to get math and science for all kids. Biology is now required for freshmen and now there are more classes of algebra for freshmen.

The goal set by Winston, the Constellation School District principal, was not directly related to improving academic achievement. Winston knew that the district would be losing one-third of the staff in the coming year and was concerned about replacing the staff with highly qualified people. Winston explained:



It is hard to believe the waivers for CISA will impact student achievement. In fact, it is very unlikely it will impact student achievement. We have kids going to Harvard and other outstanding schools. It really depends on how hard the students want to work.

There is a question in the minds of people paying attention to the progress of the innovation schools about the relationship between academic achievement and innovation status. Caroline, the principal at Meteor Elementary, stated:

I think it is a slippery slope to say you are making gains because you have innovation status. There are people who want to say that but there are just too many compounding variables in a school, like instruction, culture, and extended year. It could be any of those things. It is the sum of the parts. Median growth percentiles at innovation schools is something that we watch to see if they are higher than other schools. It seems to be. I do not want to be of the mind that it is because of innovation status.

Students need support in order to be successful. David, principal at Celestial High School, is committed to helping them be successful. As the school became more successful, David's concerns turned to sustaining the academic achievement. David also voiced concern about maintaining teachers who were not making gains in a school system. David stated:

Not all students have parent support to help them succeed. What can we do to get them over the hump? We have to give them opportunities. Settling some of the waiver issues related to hiring was the turning point. It turned conversations from being about social stuff to academics and how we could help students achieve. This changed it up and changed how the school was viewed. The proof that it is working is sustained achievement. We have to show what is needed to close the gap. It may be innovation, it may be another way, it may be mastery verses seat time, the question of tenure, financial actual not averages, or it may be another way. It is not like it was 20 years ago. Back then, they committed themselves and it is certainly a different time. The era of high stakes has contributed greatly to that. We can't give teachers a lifelong pass if they are not making gains. Year one was about culture, and year two we were deep in instruction. Our progress looked good because we were on the floor. We got lots of media play and recognition, but we were supposed to make this kind of movement. The question was could we do it again. We had 100% graduation rate, and 100% went to college. We became one of the best schools in the district.

Daniel was using assessment data as a tool to help teachers plan for instruction using flexible groupings at Comet Elementary. Daniel reported:

The biggest change was a focus on assessment, creating and choosing assessments that align. We did not add days, but we rearranged days so we have analysis days at the right time of the year. We have all of the data before the analysis days and we use those days to plan. I want teachers to plan directly from their data.

The focus at Nebula Elementary was on selecting the best curricula in order to make student achievement gains. Jackson, the principal, explained:

Autonomy gives you the opportunity to find the best curricula. It has been a positive and success year around curricula. It is an amazing challenge, but it is in the positive components because we had the opportunities to watch our kids grow. Eighty percent of our students were below grade level from kindergarten to fifth grade. Students were one and one-half or more below grade level.

Watching the third grade Spanish reading scores improve was very rewarding for Rose, the principal at Galaxy Elementary. Rose explained: “Cultural changes have impacted student achievement. Our Spanish third grade reading scores are up 15%.”

Another important component of staying focused on academic achievement was customizing the innovation plans to meet the unique needs of each school. Each of the participating schools selected innovations that were unique to the situations. The innovations made the difference between a school with innovation school status and the schools without.

The CISA identified several areas that might be considered for inclusion in the innovation school plans (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). Some of these areas were: research-based educational program; length of school day and school year; graduation policies; assessment plan; budget; staffing plan; and academic improvement expected. In addition, CISA promoted the identification of waivers of statutory and regulatory requirements (Senate Bill 08-130, 2008). The following discussion will be divided into two parts. The

first part will consider the innovations related to school programs and operations. The second part of the discussion about innovations will consider the waivers requested by the innovation schools in relation to collective bargaining and the teacher contract.

The innovations in the school plans regarding school programs and operations can be grouped into four categories: money, time, people, and program. This observation was made by Hillary, principal of Shooting Star K-8, when she explained:

We talk about people, time, money, and program. People say they want to do innovation for money by moving from averages to actuals. This is the only reason they want it. Money was not important to us. Time was important. People were most important because they would be bought into the program, fall on their faces, get back up, and go forward. They are intrepid. The District would order it as money, time, people, and programming.

A full report of the innovations selected by each school is contained in the innovation school applications on the CDE website. Table 7 identifies the innovations and categories reported in the individual interviews.

Table 7

*Innovations: Money, Time, People, and Program*

School/District	Category	Innovations
Galaxy Elementary	Money	Fund professional development Retained teacher contract
Nebula Elementary	Program	Curricula Professional development Waived teacher contracts
Comet Elementary	Program	Curricula Dual language Teacher evaluations Waived teacher contract
Meteor Elementary	Program	Waivers in all areas Waived teacher contract
Shooting Star K-8	People, Time	Waivers in all areas Waived teacher contract
Celestial High School	Time, program	Waivers in all areas Waived teacher contract
Nova High School	Money	Waivers in all areas Waived teacher contract
Zodiac High School	Program	Curricula Professional development Retained teacher contract
Constellation School District	Program	Hiring Waived teacher contract

Ben, principal at Zodiac High School, was concerned about low academic performance and lack of student engagement. Ben was searching for solutions to multiple issues at Zodiac and declared:

Our school innovation plan brought in a national program to support teacher development, academics, engagement with high level stuff, and a waiver around attendance that says a student cannot miss more than 10 days in a semester or they lose credit. The attendance waiver has not been the best. I am struggling with that.

Winston, from the Constellation School District, had only one item for the innovation plan, and that was the issue of hiring. The district was in need of strategies for hiring teachers who would stay at the schools and exempting them from traditional licensing. Winston acknowledged:

We did some research and decided to deny Title II funding. Then we did not have to meet the Title II requirements. We could set up our own guidelines about who to hire and what we wanted our professional development to be.

For Caroline, the staff at Meteor Elementary was unclear about what it meant to become an innovation school. The greatest need was also in the area of hiring. Caroline applied for all of the waivers available since that was to do at the time. Caroline responded:

Our plan was very broad, and we asked for everything. We just put it all out there because at the time we did not know what we were getting into. The guidance we were given was to keep our school the same as another district school so we would not confuse the board. At the time, all we had to do was apply for waivers. We did not have to apply for replacement waivers. We did not have to say what we were going to do instead of. My innovation plan was 14 pages long. Some of the innovation plans that now exist are 150 pages long. Now you have to define what you are going to do to replace that. Hiring, the timelines, and the process are what we had a hard time with. We did not take curriculum waivers. We did some calendar changing. We did not extend our day or our school year.

In a similar manner to Caroline, Adam also applied for every waiver. However, Adam had a unique innovation. The team at Nova High School filtered all of the decisions through decision-making criteria with the intent of staying close to the common values and beliefs of the leadership team. Adam made the following observation.

We waived everything under the sun. Our program did not deviate much from the district curricula. We got a discount because the district was buying it. We had no professional development from the district, except for what was court ordered. We set decision-making criteria that we wanted to filter everything we did through. People want to know about our schedule. Really, it was about a process of being very close to the evidence and trying not to get too far out there from what I personally think is right for kids.

The innovations at Celestial High School were focused on student achievement.

The innovations included high expectations for student performance and support as the students progressed. The principal, David, stated:

The innovations included a schedule change. We added one additional hour to the day. We changed performance so that students who were deficient were moved out of their elective until they were proficient enough to return. The kids must show what they know to get back on track. We supported the kids who need it both in academics and behavior. We received curriculum waivers and money by doing actual, not averages. I broke the bank and asked for everything. We got to do more things back then since it was new.

Lengthening the school day at Shooting Star K-8 gave the staff more time during the day to meet the needs of students. Hillary indicated:

We lengthened the school day by one hour. People were the most important thing at our schools. It is about doing the best for kids and meeting the needs of kids and making those adjustments as quickly as possible.

Specific innovations were written into the plan at Comet Elementary. Daniel, the principal, explained at length the complex four-tiered system being used to evaluate teachers at the school. Daniel's explanation follows.

Our innovations included curriculum, a dual-language program, teachers as at-will employees, and teacher evaluations that are now four categories: tenured originally, probationary, tenure at-will, and new teachers. New teachers hired outside the District are not subject to the contract. They are considered at-will employees. New teachers from within the district with probationary or non-probationary status are also at-will. Current teachers at the school who are probationary will advance under the district contract.

The teachers at Nebula Elementary were also at-will employees. There was a focus on teaching and learning using the curricula selected by the school. The principal, Jackson, advised:

We waived the district contract. All teachers here are at-will with no grievance process, and we do not follow a grievance process. We waived the majority of the contract. Some district professional development is also waived since we felt it was not meeting the needs of our kids. We are focused on curricula, differentiation, and ELA strategies.

Money was the innovation requested at Galaxy Elementary. The focus was on professional development so that the entire school could be congruent in their instruction.

The principal, Rose, commented:

We selected financial innovation so we could support our professional development. The money came from the savings for actual verses averages. We are doing the district curriculum focused on the common core, putting our strategies on top of the district curriculum. We are getting more innovative with how we are implementing the curriculum.

The innovations selected by the principals were varied and school specific. The CISA allows for the schools to determine their needs and align the needs with innovations in areas such as curriculum, schedules, and the length of the school day. Innovations were selected in the areas of money, time, program, and people.

The second topic of the discussion about the innovations selected by the innovation schools is collective bargaining. Each of the schools applying for innovation status has the option to select state statutes and regulatory or district policy requirements the school would like to waive in order to implement the plan. There are also certain statutes that may not be waived by the state board.

One of the waivers available is in the area of collective bargaining. Schools are able to eliminate the teacher contract and hire teachers on an annual basis. This practice

was referred to by several principals as employing teachers “at-will.” The teacher contract has been an institution in education and has traditionally been concerned with areas such as tenure, a grievance procedure, hiring, evaluation, and retention of teachers. The collective bargaining component of CISA is controversial, yet it offers the opportunity for change within the operations of innovation schools.

The law also requires that the collective bargaining agreements be approved by at least 60% of the personnel at the affected innovation district or school who are members of the collective bargaining agreement. Table 7 identified the schools that have collective bargaining agreements and at-will employees because they effectively waived the teacher contract at their schools. All of the schools except one waived the teacher contract.

What exactly does it mean for a teacher to be “at-will”? An example of the language used in one of the innovation plans about waiving the teacher contract states that the teachers at this school are “at-will” and have the right to end their work relationship with the school and district at any time. The innovation plan continues to explain that the district also has the right to end the work relationship with the teacher at any time.

The participants in the interviews talked about the collective bargaining agreements at the schools. Of the four elementary schools in the study, only Galaxy Elementary did not change the teacher contract. The principal, Rose, reasoned:

There is no place in the document that says anything about impacting the teacher contract. Teachers were not giving up their union protections. The union came in and met with our teachers two or three times right before the vote. That is one of the reasons the first vote did not pass. They scared the pants off our teachers.

The teacher contract was eliminated at Nebula Elementary where Jackson was able to hire 34 new staff members. Jackson made the following statement.



We waived the district contract. All teachers here are at-will. There is no grievance process and we do not follow a grievance procedure. We waived the majority of the district contract. Our teachers voted and we had 94% support for this last June.

Daniel, the principal at Comet Elementary, also eliminated the teacher contract for teachers hired after innovation status was designated. Comet Elementary retained the district contract for teachers working in the building before becoming an innovation school. Daniel reported, “The teachers here are at-will. We grandfathered in the teachers who were here. The teacher evaluations have 4 categories.”

An innovation established by Shooting Star K-8 applied the concept of having a leadership team evaluate the teachers. Hillary, the principal, described the impact of waiving the teacher contract at the school.

Cultural fit and your performance are the two categories. The leadership team reviews you. You earn your job by doing your job. It makes people very uncomfortable at times because in our profession, they have not seen people go. It has been hard on me because I am a people person. I am a teacher. I have had to let a lot of people go. The bar has been raised. If you are not doing the right things with kids culturally, you go.

David was working hard to turn the conversation to academics and student achievement at Celestial High School. The actions the teachers took will have an impact on the future teachers at the school. David said, “Here is what we will do. We will grandfather people here into regular status. New people will become at-will employees. This was the turning point. The teachers gave away the rights of future teachers.”

Collective bargaining was waived in seven of the nine schools involved in the study. One elementary school, Galaxy Elementary, did not waive the teacher contract because the teachers would not agree to waive it. Zodiac High School did not waive the teacher contract because of the focus on developing the potential of the teachers.

Ensuring student success is the responsibility of the principals. The purpose of the CISA is to provide structures and pathways to increase student achievement and remove barriers that impede academic achievement. The principals of innovation schools have unique options for obtaining the ultimate goal of increasing academic achievement.

**Reflecting on the next steps for innovation schools.** The final theme generated by the data was reflecting on the next steps after gaining innovation status. The participants in the study reflected upon the perceptions of implementing CISA in their schools or district. The participants brought full circle their experiences during the three stages of CISA--development, implementation, and continuous improvement--and the subsequent perceptions of and reflections upon where they had been and where they wanted to go.

The perceptions from the participants as they reflected on their work were a mixture of positive and negative comments. Some of the positive perceptions reported about implementing CISA were that it was an exciting challenge. Jackson, the principal of Nebula Elementary, stated:

It has been an exciting challenge. I have had three days off since June 10 last year. I am exhausted. It is an amazing challenge and the positive components give us opportunities to watch our kids grow. Once kids believe that people believe in them, they will do anything in the world for you.

Winston, from the Constellation School District, also reported a positive perception of CISA:

I would do it all over again. I believe it is the right thing to do to solve the problems in our rural district. I always believe if there is a problem, you need to change it. You have to be willing to get knocked down a lot and you will get back up. There is a famous saying of Winston Churchill that I like, 'An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last.'

Rose, the principal of Galaxy Elementary, also felt that becoming an innovation school was beneficial for the school. Rose explained: “I would do it over again because of the culture it has created. The next steps are to focus on academic performance.”

David, the principal at Celestial High School, provided advice on implementing CISA:

You feel like the whole state is watching you. We don't have to reinvent everything. I recommend a tier system of implement the waivers from CISA and trying to implement in a small amount of time. For example, year one is about schedules and financial and your implement over time. Year two, you add some more things. If you try to do everything, all of the waivers, it confuses things and burns people out. There is a certain way to do it, and that is to build capacity. You kill yourself and others so I caution principals to use the waiver for at-will teachers very cautiously. It creates fear.

Ben had a succinct way of stating the positive outcomes of gaining innovation school status: “We are a school of innovation. We are trying new things because of that.”

Daniel talked about a possible concern at Comet Elementary that the union would somehow interfere with the work of becoming an innovation school. Daniel explained: “The perceived challenges were worrisome and took up a lot of space. The real challenge is writing the plan because it is hard and detailed work. The resistance I thought would come from the union never came and that surprised me.”

Some of the more negative perceptions reported about implementing CISA were that the school districts were not responsive to the innovation schools. Ben, the principal at Zodiac High School, stated, “Your first answer at the district is always ‘no.’”

Adam, the principal at Nova High School, was frustrated by the lack of district capacity to implement and sustain the innovation plan for the school. Adam explained:

Regression to the mean is going to be the next steps in all innovation schools. There is no organizational or leadership practices in most schools after the principal turns over. It's like a third world dictatorship. If you have radical

problems, you can make radical change. There is no stability and there is no momentum. CISA did not address that. Professional development was another strong point of contention. We did not need their permission or their funding to not go to a training. They would say 'no,' and they would win because they had control over our money. I was blown away by how poorly the system was functioning to support schools and achievement goals.

Caroline, the principal at Meteor Elementary, was concerned about a large urban district having the capacity to respond to the needs of individual innovation schools.

Caroline reported: "What made it difficult to run a district made it difficult to run a school. Hire the best and get out of the way. The next steps are to be innovative instructionally."

The reflections shared by the participants offered insight as they moved on to the next steps. Each school will be required to prepare a renewal plan at the end of the three year process and present the renewal plan to the local school board for approval.

Caroline explained, "Renewal and reviewing where you are at, a status check, how you want to redefine what you are doing, if you are making gains. These are the next steps."

The next steps will be taken after looking back and reflecting on the first three years of innovation status.

In summary, the seven themes that emerged from the individual interviews provided a window into the experiences and perceptions of the principals who led the schools through the process to achieve innovation status, implement the innovation plans, and apply for renewal from the local school boards. The themes were: (a) why schools decided to seek innovation status, (b) how the innovation school applications were created, (c) generating support for the innovation plans, (d) impact of innovation status on school culture, (e) operating with autonomy from state and local constraints,

(f) staying focused on student achievement, and (g) reflecting on next steps for innovation schools. The Innovation School Application for each school posted on the CDE website confirmed information shared in the interviews.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I reported the findings of the study. An analysis of the individual interviews of the participants resulted in the seven themes that emerged. A rich narrative about the themes was included along with direct quotes from the participants. The themes were: (a) why schools decided to seek innovation status, (b) how the innovation school applications were created, (c) generating support for the innovation plans, (d) impact of innovation status on school culture, (e) operating with autonomy from state and local constraints, (f) staying focused on student achievement, and (g) reflecting on next steps for innovation schools. In Chapter V, I will discuss the conclusions of the study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In the final chapter of the study, I provide an overview of the purpose and the findings of the study. This is followed by an interpretation of the findings and implications for social change. Recommendations for action and further study are also included. The chapter closes with a discussion of the experiences of the researcher and concluding statements about the study.

#### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to address the research question posed at the beginning of the study. The research question was: What were the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008? The background for this study presented in the earlier chapters set the stage by addressing three goals of education reform. The first two goals of education reform, stated in the simplest terms, were eliminating the achievement gap and increasing the high school graduation rate. The third goal was stated by the President of the United States, Barack Obama, as meeting our moral obligation to educate all of the children in our country.

I studied a policy in Colorado in relation to the work principals were doing to implement the policy. The policy is called the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008 (CISA), and the policy is part of a national trend to create innovation schools as a reform

model to address the educational issues in the United States. The purpose of the policy is to allot school districts and the individual schools an alternative model for conducting the work of schooling. The policy also grants autonomy to principals to make innovative decisions that address the specific needs of the students, staff, and community in order to increase academic achievement, eliminate the achievement gap, increase the high school graduation rate, and educate all of the children in the school community.

In order to become an innovation school, the schools in this study prepared and submitted an innovation plan to the local and state school boards for approval. The plans identified the innovations selected by the schools in the areas of people, time, money, and programs. The most unique and perhaps game-changing options for school innovation included in the policy were the waivers for which districts and schools could apply in the school innovation plans. The waivers permitted a decoupling from existing state statutes and district policies. Collective bargaining could be waived. The length of the school day or year could be changed. School governance, curriculum, assessments, and compensation could all look different than a district or school that did not have innovation status.

For this study, I interviewed 10 principals whose schools had been granted innovation status. I conducted the interviews at the schools or in a nearby location convenient to the participant. To address the research question, each participant was asked semi-structured, open ended questions using an interview protocol with 12 questions. The subsequent transcriptions and coded themes were sent electronically to each participant for member checking, and a second interview was scheduled. Between the first and second interview, I reviewed the application for each school requesting

innovation school status. These applications are available on the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) website. The review of the applications was conducted to clarify and confirm information shared by the participants in the interviews, search for additional evidence of principal voice, and develop questions for the participant about the application.

The second interviews conducted with the participants were held to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions, clarify any statements, and make additions and corrections. Member checks were sent electronically to assure accuracy of the data. Trustworthiness was maintained throughout the study and included field notes, a research journal, first and second interviews, member checks, triangulation, document review of applications, and advice from my university advisors. I engaged in continual self-reflection about my role as the researcher and how my personal background and experiences shaped my interpretation.

After confirming the accuracy of the data, a rich narrative was written about the themes that emerged from the data. The narrative included direct quotations from the participants. Each of the schools and the participants was provided with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings of the study were obtained through a process of continually reading, reviewing, and refining the data into seven themes. The themes were: (a) why schools decided to seek innovation status, (b) how the innovation school applications were created, (c) generating support for the innovation plans, (d) impact of innovation status on school culture, (e) operating with autonomy from local and state constraints,



(f) staying focused on student achievement, and (g) reflecting on next steps for innovation schools.

An interpretation of the findings in this qualitative phenomenological study will work to surface the experiences and perceptions expressed by the participants of the study. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experiences from the perspective of the individual. “Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions” (Husserl, 1970, p. 1).

### **Conclusions**

After a discussion of the findings of the study, the next step was to draw conclusions from the findings. Using the word *conclusions* implies that the findings are final, definitive, and defensible (Lester, 1999, p. 4). The use of the term *conclusions* in this discussion was used more to describe a supposition or an interpretation arrived at after reading, rereading, reviewing, and refining the data, and less to declare finality. “A suppositional structure to arguments can be useful to indicate that the study is not coming to a firm conclusion, but pointing to implications of ways forward which make sense if the interpretation referred to is an accurate or useful one (Lester, 1999, p. 4). In addition, the conclusions will address the research question which was: What were the experiences and perceptions of principals whose schools were granted innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008?

**Understand the change process.** The first conclusion was that principal leaders must have a thorough understanding of the change process as they lead their school communities through the change from a district school to an innovation school. Michael

Fullan (2001) emphasized how important it is for leaders to understand the change process and maintained that neglecting the phenomenology of change is the reason most social reforms fail (p. 8). In addition, he described how individuals come to grips with change, make meaning from change, and build capacity about the change are the keys to future change (Fullan, 2001, p. 29). This is precisely the work that principal leaders were doing throughout the process of leading the school communities in the writing and implementation of the innovation plans.

“Educational reforms are planned efforts to change schools in order to correct perceived social and education problems” (Tyack & Cuban, 1997, p. 3). The CISA is an educational reform with the explicit intended outcome of increasing academic achievement. This reform is not intended to “sap the strength and spirit of schools” (Hatch, 2000, p. 4) as is so often the case in typical urban school districts (Hess, 1999, p. 1). It is not intended to be an innovation that is a “burden in disguise” (Fullan, 2001, p.24). The CISA was intended to provide a change structure that would be responsive to the needs of individual schools.

The change process occurs in stages that are identified as initiation, implementation, and continuation (Hope & Pigford, 2001). These stages “enhance the possibility of successful policy implementation” (p. 44). “Like any innovation, policy mandates in education are susceptible to the realities of the change process” (Fullan, 2001, p. 4). The stages of the change process are similar to the stages in the process to become an innovation school: development, implementation, and continuous improvement. Principals who understand the stages of the change process will have a mental model for doing the work of taking their schools through the process to innovation

school status. Principal leader need to understand that knowledge and implementation of the change process are integral to the success or lack of success of their school reform efforts.

**Maintain instructional leadership.** The second conclusion was that principals who establish and maintain high expectations for exemplary instructional practices and academic achievement realize positive results. The specific examples in the interviews of positive academic results were reported by nearly every school. Rose reported the increase in Spanish reading scores, Jackson reported an increase in reading and math scores, Daniel reported positive results using assessments and planning, Hillary reported aligning instructional practices led to increases in student achievement, David reported becoming one of the highest achieving schools in the district, and Ben reported positive academic results due to high expectations with math and science. Caroline reported that the median growth percentile scores, a measure used by CDE to identify academic progress in relation to the state standards, seemed to be higher in the innovation schools. Caroline did not, however, believe there was a direct correlation between innovation school status and student achievement because of the many compounding variables that exist in schools.

David said that the increase in academic achievement was expected because we were “on the floor.” This statement resonated with me because it illustrated the beliefs that the principal had in the positive impact of high expectations for the school. The role of the principal is complex and varied. The role of the principal as the instructional leader of the school is at the heart of change and progress. There is less emphasis on the

principal's role as a manager and more on responsibilities for instructional leadership (Hallinger, 1992).

In a study over the past 15 years on the impact of principals, it was determined that principals “exercise a measurable, though indirect, effect on school effectiveness and student achievement” (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 187). Another conclusion of the study was that principals “influence school performance by shaping school goals, direction, structure, and organizational and social networks” (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 187). Further, successful principal leadership “guides the school policies, procedures, and practices that contribute directly to student learning” (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 187). The participants in the study were guiding the school innovation policies in the writing of the school innovation plan and establishing procedures and practices to implement the innovation plan for the schools.

“The role of principals is about practice, not personality” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 63). Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified five practices that exemplify the leadership of effective principals: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 64). As I reflect on the words and actions of the participants, these practices were exemplified as the principals modeled the way to become an innovation school, inspired a shared vision in their innovation plans, challenged the process by selecting innovations and waivers to meet the needs of the school, enabled others to act by implementing the school plan, and provided supported and encouragement along the way.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) advocated for the role of the principal to be that of an instructional leader. Hiring practices that gave autonomy to principals were

also important to role of the instructional principal (Papa & Baxter, 2008). The use and interpretation of data to inform decision-making was extensively cited as another element important to instructional principals (Ross & Gray, 2006). For the participants in this study, being an instructional leader is essential. Several of the principals spoke about the importance of hiring their own staff. Jackson reported being able to hire 34 new staff members for his school and considered that critical for moving forward. The participants were in agreement that data were important for their school innovation plans, implementation of the plans, writing their renewal plans, and gauging their progress along the way.

The Institute of Education leadership (IEL) developed the School Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative. This initiative was created by a task force who came to the agreement that school systems must reinvent the role of the principal to meet the needs of schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (IEL, 2000). The initiative advocates that the role of a principal of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century school be that of a visionary leader, instructional leader, and community leader. These are the roles that our participants identified for themselves in the interviews. The participants worked with the school communities to create the vision for the schools in the innovation plans, led the staff in the instructional implementation of the plan, and involved the community throughout the process.

DuFour and Marzano (2009) promoted a model for the role of the principal called learning leadership. Within this model, principals provide opportunities for teacher collaboration, engage in progress monitoring to identify if students are learning, and empower teachers with the tools they need to be effective (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). Principals who are learning leaders work collaboratively with teams to increase student

achievement. This model also fits the role of the principals who participated in the study. The participants reported providing teachers with the resources they needed to be effective. In addition, the principals reported meeting with grade level and content area teams to talk about student achievement, engagement, data, and other issues related to the implementation of the school innovation plans.

**Promote a positive school culture.** The third conclusion was that engaging in the iterative process of generating an application for innovation status that includes the principal and the school committee results in a more positive school culture. Several of the participants reported that an improvement in the culture of their schools was an unexpected result of going through the process of writing and implementing the innovation plan. One participant called the improvement in her school culture an “unanticipated benefit of developing this plan.” Another principal reported that the feel of the school culture in an innovation school is “tangible.” This principal attributed the tangible feel to the staff having spent so much time clarifying their beliefs, values, and goals as they created the innovation plan. A third principal remarked how astonished people were when they walked through the hallways of the school that used to be chaotic and were now orderly.

Kouzes and Posner (2007), as was stated earlier in this discussion, identified five practices that exemplary principal leaders do: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart (p. 64). Each of these practices has an impact on the school culture. The participants talked about building the capacity of their teachers and encouraging them to do the right work. Each principal who

leads a school through the innovation school process engages in these practices, and the change in the school culture is one of the outcomes, whether anticipated or unanticipated.

Developing a shared vision or covenant (Sergiovanni, 1990) took place as the schools created their innovation plans. The community has an important role in CISA that designates the community as partners in developing the school. Teachers are required to demonstrate their support for becoming an innovation school by a staff vote. The challenge for the school principal and the stakeholders was to grow the shared vision.

**Address the level of autonomy.** The fourth conclusion of the study was that principals of innovation schools want autonomy in leading and implementing the innovation plans created to meet the unique needs of their schools. This area seemed to have caused the most frustration for several of the participants. Even though the CISA explicitly states that school leaders will have autonomy, the level of autonomy expected as opposed to the level of autonomy that was actually realized was reportedly incongruent.

One of the participants felt that the school district in which the innovation school was located did not have the capacity to grant the level of autonomy that was expected. This was manifested in the principal not having full access to resources and budget. Another principal reported that the CISA should have been named the Autonomous Schools Act instead of the Colorado Innovations Schools Act because of the importance of having autonomy to make the decisions necessary to improve her school.

In the larger modern scope of school reform, autonomy has been realized in the form of charter schools and online and blended learning. Charter schools are more

independent from state policies and have opportunities to try innovations (Betts & Tang, 2011, p. 1). Chartered schools have “the freedom to step outside the department structure of district schools” and “create new architectures for learning” (Christensen, 1997, p. 1). The No Child Left Behind waivers that were granted for many states gave the states the autonomy to rely on their own systems of accountability for the performance of districts and schools.

Papa and Baxter (2008) reported that hiring practices that gave autonomy to principals and helped them identify the critical factors for which they were screening teachers within the interview process were an important factor for instructional leaders. This addresses the frustration of another principal who wanted autonomy over hiring decisions without interference from the school district.

**Implement exemplary leadership strategies and qualities.** The fifth conclusion was that principals demonstrated exemplary leadership strategies and qualities as they developed and implemented the school innovation plans with their school staff and community. The participants in the interviews talked about the courage that it took to take on the challenge of becoming an innovation school. The participants spoke about the long hours, endless meetings, hard conversations, and frustrations with district leadership. The leaders demonstrated courage and commitment which are essential qualities for transformational and authentic principal leadership.

Transformational leadership has three characteristics: “charisma (identifying and sustaining a vision of the organization), intellectual stimulation of members, and individual consideration (Ross & Gray, 2006, p. 2). Transformational leaders know how to develop self-efficacy which leads individuals to go beyond the formal requirement of



the job to engage in productive functions to enhance organizational effectiveness (Leithwood, Tomlinson, & Genge, 1996). Certainly, the participants were engaged in this work throughout the process of gaining innovation status.

The participants reported in the interviews about the importance of establishing trust within their school communities. This is a quality of an authentic leader. Authentic leaders inspire trust, and that is the link between the leader and the school staff (Evans, 2001).

**Tailor innovation plans to meet district or school needs.** The sixth conclusion was that school leaders needed to tailor their innovation plans to meet the needs that are unique to the district or schools. Winston, one of the participants in the study, wrote an innovation plan with the school community, oversaw the implementation of the plan, and prepared the renewal plan. Winston was courageous, inspired trust, and created the vision for the plan. Winston was concerned with only one issue in the innovation plan, and that was the issue of hiring and evaluating a high functioning and sustainable staff.

Other participants in the study also selected innovations tailored to meet the needs of their students. The variety of innovations included: instruction for second-language learners, assessment that informed the instructional process, hiring exemplary teachers, high academic expectations, control of the budget, and selecting the curricula. The important point is that not all schools need the same innovations, and the principal or district leaders must identify the realities for the school community. “While educational policy is based on the reality of legislators, implementation of policy is dependent on the realities of educators” (Hope & Pigford, 2000, p. 44).

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for social change in the context of the CISA are complex. The implications stem back to the discussion in Chapter I regarding the purpose of education. I stated that the purpose of education is to develop the full potential of the individual, for the sake of both the individual and democracy, and to provide systematic general education, addressing both the purposes of a democracy and the needs of the individual (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997). Over the past 50 years, there have been multiple school reform efforts, beginning in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik when the excellence of the schools in the United States was questioned and extending to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001. Most recently in 2012, waivers were granted to 33 states from the NCLB requirements because the federal government has not come to agreement about reauthorizing the policy. The waivers for the 33 states were granted if the states had identified plans to hold schools accountable for the performance of students in subgroups such as second-language learners and students in special education.

The waivers given to the 33 states demonstrate that the debate about the purpose of school and the future of our schools is at a fever pitch. “The most crucial issue facing public schools in the new millennium is whether the current system can--or even should--survive the pressures of disintegration that have come to the fore in recent years” (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 438). Education in the United States is in need of reform to eliminate the achievement gap, increase the high school graduation rate, and meet our moral imperative to educate all of the children in America. It is in this context of the focus on 21<sup>st</sup> Century education that the CISA was established.

The purpose of the CISA was to provide a structure and a pathway for schools to tailor their educational services to meet the needs of their students and communities. The CISA is part of a larger movement in the United States to create new schools that operate in Innovative School Zones. An Innovation School Zone is organized within a local or state public education system where entrepreneurs are afforded the autonomy, authority, and incentive necessary to pursue innovation from interference (Education Innovating, 2001). Other major cities, including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Denver, are also involved in creating the climate for new and different innovation schools

The implications for social change share underlying themes with the conclusions of the study discussed previously. First, the principals of innovation schools view themselves as leaders of the change process, instructional leaders, and transformational leaders throughout the course of gaining innovation status and implementing the innovation plans. Second, the school communities of innovation schools are an integral part of developing and maintaining innovation schools. Third, a positive change in the school culture exists in innovation schools due to the process of clarifying beliefs, value, mission, vision, and goals in the development of the innovation plan. The fourth and final implication is that innovation schools hold the potential to be successful models of school reform that can be replicated in other areas of the United States.

### **Recommendations for Action**

There are several recommendations that can be made for school districts engaged with or interested in innovation schools as a model for school reform. These recommendations are important to superintendents, district administrators, principal

leaders, and school committees that are engaging in the process of writing a school innovation plan in order to gain innovation status for their schools. There are also recommendations for principals and the school staffs who are implementing the school innovation plan, either as the original authors of the plan or as people coming to a school where a plan is already written, and the new people are the implementers. Finally, these recommendations may be important to the research currently underway regarding innovation schools as a reform model in the United States and to the policy makers who are working to write legislation for innovation schools.

The recommendations that follow are a synthesis of the findings, implications, and conclusions previously discussed. The recommendations bring forward the experiences, perceptions, and advise of the participants in the study.

### **Recommendations for Principals and Superintendents Writing a School Innovation Plan**

1. Include the members of the school staff and community in the process from the beginning.
2. Provide a clear understanding of the school innovation plan, including the process, outcomes, implementation, and renewal that is required every three years.
3. Review the plans of other innovation schools to help build an understanding of the process.
4. Involve the school district central office people who are involved with the innovation schools.
5. Make the process iterative so that the plan concurrently builds and informs.
6. Expect resistance and celebrate cooperation.

7. Inform the school community as the process proceeds.
8. Select innovations that fit the needs of the school and provide the promise for positive change and success.
9. Roll out the plan in stages so that the principal, staff, and community do not suffer from reform fatigue.
10. Write the renewal plan at the end of three years by continually reviewing what is working and what is not as supported by data.

**Recommendations for Principals  
and Superintendents Implement-  
ing a School Innovation Plan**

1. Provide clear expectations about the implementation process of the school plan, particularly for members new to the staff and community.
2. Celebrate the successes along the way and work to correct the challenges.
3. Roll out the plan in stages so that the principal, staff, and community do not suffer from reform fatigue and burnout.
4. Provide the necessary resources for the school staff, students, and community to successfully implement the plan.
5. Engage in continual reflection about the implementation process by maintaining a journal with data, meeting notes, timeline, challenges, and successes, and use the journal information to inform the renewal process.
6. Form or join a cadre of innovation school principals and meet on a regular basis to support one another, problem solve, and celebrate the successes.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

There are several recommendations for future study regarding innovation schools and principal leadership. Five of the important areas for future study are:

1. The relationship between innovation schools and academic achievement.
2. The effectiveness of waiving collective bargaining at the innovation schools and the impact on teacher unions.
3. The capacity of school districts to support new policies, in general, and the Innovation Schools Act of 2008, specifically.
4. The role of the principal in implementing new policies.
5. The future of innovation schools, whether it means regression to the mean or a successful school reform model that can be replicated across the United States,
6. The lack of involvement of other school districts in creating innovation schools.

### **Limitations**

This phenomenological study was concerned with the experiences and perceptions regarding the phenomena of principal leadership for innovation schools in one state in the United States. This study was confined to 10 participants and the school applications for innovation status of the schools. The themes that emerged and were presented in Chapter IV of this study represent the voices of the participants. The results of the study cannot be generalized to all innovation schools in the United States. The conclusions can be open to analysis and interpretation.

### **Experience of the Researcher**

My expertise as a researcher increased significantly throughout this study. I brought to the study my own perceptions and possible biases or preconceived ideas and values as a result of my professional career as an educator and current role as a school principal. My biggest preconception was probably thinking that I understood the entire research process at the beginning, when I did not. The research study requires a mostly solitary journey through the literature, the writing, and the data collection. There are few signposts along the way that assure movement in the right direction. As I grew in my understanding of the process, I grew in confidence as a writer and researcher.

I made a conscious effort to keep my own bias out of the study. As I transcribed the interviews with the participants, I used my field notes and research journal to stay true to what I heard. That was not difficult. Collapsing the information into themes required a more intense focus on capturing what the participants said and not what I wanted them to say. The member checks helped me feel confident that the participants agreed that I had captured their experiences and perceptions and had not substituted my own.

Another preconceived idea I had as the interviewer was that the principal responses would vary from my own thinking about the process of schooling. For the most part, the principals related experiences and perceptions to which I could relate and could understand. The principals were more similar to me than different in their roles as principal leaders.

The effect of my interviews on the participants was shared with me by several of the participants during the second interviews. One principal participant told me that she was in the process of enrolling in a doctoral program and that she hoped to do a study

similar to mine. We had a discussion about the pros and cons of working in a doctoral program while being a school principal. A second participant invited me to dinner one evening, and we had a very friendly and collegial conversation about innovation schools.

A third participant was curious about what other districts were doing in relation to innovation schools and asked me to share what I knew. And, a fourth participant invited her assistant principal to meet me before our second interview. The assistant principal and I shared a friendly conversation and exchanged business cards so that we could stay in touch during the school year. This was a surprising and rewarding result of the interview with the principal.

The general impact that I heard from the participants was that the interview with me was an opportunity to reflect on the process of writing and implementing of the innovation plan and to think about next steps for their schools. The CISA requires a renewal plan from each innovation school every three years. The participants were reflective about where their schools were in that timeline, and it is my hope that the interviews were helpful in preparation for the next steps.

### **Summary**

The participants in this study perceived themselves to be the lead architects of the innovation school plans and the administrators of the implementation of the plans. The principals who were interviewed worked with the school communities to create the vision for innovation school status. The vision included selecting the innovations that would bring the promise for academic success for every student in the school or district. Innovation schools hold promise for academic success as new school reform models.



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APPENDIX A

COLORADO SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS SEEKING INNOVATION  
STATUS, 2009-2011

*Colorado Schools and Districts Seeking Innovation Status, 2009-2011*  
(Source [www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/06/23/20567](http://www.ednewscolorado.org/2011/06/23/20567))

District/School	Grades Served	Approval Date
Colorado Springs District 11		
Wasson High School	9-12	August, 2010
Denver Public Schools		
Manual High School	9-12	March, 2009
Montclair School of Academia	K-5	March, 2009
Cole Academy of Arts & Science	K-8	August, 2009
Denver Green School	K-8	April, 2010
Valdez Innovation School	K-5	June, 2010
Martin Luther King, Jr. Early College	6-8	September, 2010
Whittier K-8 School	K-8	September, 2010
Collegiate Prep at Montbello	9-12	May, 2011
Denver Center for International Studies at Ford	6-12	May, 2011
Denver Center for International Studies at Montbello	9-12	May, 2011
Denver Center for International Studies at Wyman	9-12	May, 2011
Noel Community Arts School	6, 9	May, 2011
High Tech High School	9-12	May, 2011
Godsman Elementary	K-5	August, 2011

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District/School	Grades Served	Approval Date
Green Valley Elementary	K-5	August, 2011
McGlone Elementary	K-5	August, 2011
Summit Academy	K-5	August, 2011
Swiegert McAuliffe International School	K-8	August, 2011
Vista Academy	K-5	August, 2011
Kit Carson School District		
Kit Carson Elementary Schools	K-5	March, 2011
Kit Carson Junior/Senior High School	6-12	March, 2011

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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*Interview Protocol*

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Project: Innovation Schools Status

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Name:

Position:

Educational background:

Years in position:

The purpose of the study is to explore the motivations of school leaders whose schools were granted innovation and autonomous status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. In addition, I am interested in learning about what innovations were adopted by the Colorado schools granted innovation school status in accordance with Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. The 16 schools leaders whose schools have been granted innovation status by the Colorado School Board will be interviewed. I will also be analyzing the applications submitted by the 16 application teams for common themes.

The data from the interviews and the document analyses will be kept confidential. Each school leader will have a code and names will not be part of the study. After the interview, I will transcribe it and send it to you by email for your review and approval. The school applications are online on the Colorado Department of Education website so they are accessible to the public. However, an analysis of those documents will be kept confidential. This data will also be coded and names will not be used.

The interview will take about 45-60 minutes. Please read and sign the consent form. I will turn on the tape recorder and test it. I will also be taking notes.

Questions:

1. Please tell me about your experiences as you started thinking about the Colorado Innovation Schools Act?
2. What were your motivations for going through the process of applying for innovation status for your school? In other words, why did you do it?
3. What was the make-up of the school team that completed the application with you? I am interested in the number of teachers, staff, advisors, community members, or others who worked with you, rather than their names.
4. What did the typical process look like when you were putting together the application?
5. What were the greatest challenges you faced in going through the process of applying for innovation status?
6. What was going on above and below you in your school district at this time, both at the district level and at the teacher level?
7. What are the innovations you selected to be adopted by your school and why did you select those particular innovations?
8. How would you describe the changes in your school culture after being given the innovation school designation?
9. Now that your school has been given innovation status, what do you believe are the next steps?
10. If you had it to do over again, would you have gone through the process of applying for innovation status or taken another path for school reform? Please explain
11. Are you in contact with the other innovation schools? If so, what does that contact entail?
12. Thank you so much for your time and your very thoughtful responses. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you again for your cooperation and participation in this study. Please be assured that the responses will be kept confidential. After the information is transcribed and coded, I will email a copy to you so you can check it for accuracy before our second interview. I would like to schedule our second interview at this time. It will take place in about 30 days. In our second interview, we will talk about the coded transcription so you can check it for accuracy. I will also read the application that you submitted before the next meeting for context and code the application for principal voice. At our second interview, we will talk about my impressions of this information, too. You can check my impressions of the application for accuracy as well.



APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Principal Leadership and the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008

Researcher: Margaret A. Walsh

Educational Research & Policy Studies

Phone: 303.818.6710 e-mail: [wals7799@bears.unco.edu](mailto:wals7799@bears.unco.edu)

Research advisor: Dr. Linda Vogel

Phone: 970-351-2119 e-mail: [Linda.Vogel@unco.edu](mailto:Linda.Vogel@unco.edu)

The purpose of this research is to gain information from principals about their experiences and perceptions applying for innovation status in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. This qualitative study is being conducted by Margaret A. Walsh as a partial fulfillment of an Ed.D. at the University of Northern Colorado. You have been invited to participate in this research project because you are a principal who wrote an application to become an innovation school and your school was granted innovation school status.

The procedure involves participating in two interviews that will take approximately 45-60 minutes each, and will be conducted about one month apart. Your responses will be confidential and we do not reveal names. The interview questions will be about your experiences and perceptions as you developed the application to become an innovation school in accordance with the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008. It is important to hear the voices of practitioners in the field, as much of the discourse on the role of principals has come from researchers and politicians. The interviews will take place at a location in your school district, or at an alternate, neutral location if desired.

We will do our utmost to keep your information confidential, although full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All data recorded on an Olympus recording device or written, is stored in a password protected electronic format, and all paper data will be in a locked cabinet. To help protect your confidentiality, the interview transcripts will not contain information that will personally identify you.

There are only minimal foreseeable risks in this study, no greater than those normally encountered during regular workplace interactions. You will have the benefit of adding your voice to research within the field of leadership. If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Margaret A. Walsh at [wals7799@unco.edu](mailto:wals7799@unco.edu). This research has been reviewed according to the University of Northern Colorado IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. By signing below, you will give us permission for your participation. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Signature of Participant

Date

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