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by

Samantha Brooks

December 2018

EXAMINING THE PREDICTABLE STAGES OF SCHOOL DECLINE  
THROUGH A CAMPUS CASE STUDY

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree

Doctor of K-12 Professional Leadership

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## Abstract

**Background:** For decades, public education, particularly in urban communities, has failed to ensure students of color are able to experience sustained academic success. As a result, campuses within these communities often find themselves vacillating between impending school improvement reforms and short-lived school improvements, only to return to a state of decline within a few years. Research findings on declining civilizations, organizations and teams reveal parallels to the complex characteristics found within schools in decline. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to explore the complexities within the predictable stages of school decline in an urban high school through the lens of five critical leaders who served on the campus before and during the decline. The participants' roles range from teacher-leaders to campus principals. The stories of school decline provide insight for educational leaders within these settings, potentially helping them to avoid predictable pitfalls associated with avoiding school decline. **Methods:** An instrumental case study design using purposeful sampling was conducted to answer how and why: (a) the organization was blind to the early stages of decline, (b) recognized the need to change, yet failed to act, (c) took action that was inappropriate, and, (d) reached a point of crisis. To ensure reliability, triangulation using multiple sources of data and member checking were employed. The researcher determined and codified emerging themes from retrospective interviews of five participants who occupied leadership roles on the campus during the decline: two principals, one assistant principal, and two teachers. Participant interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and codified, and historical documents were gathered to identify school-wide practices and turnaround/decline timelines. Historical background provided

context for the case. Findings from the interviews were cross-checked against data reports on the campus retrieved from the state education agency, district disaggregated state testing reports, and a campus improvement plan at a critical point during the decline, and the researcher solicited feedback on emerging findings from participants to determine if interpretations ring true. **Findings:** The findings from this case study reveal school decline does exist in predictable stages, but not in the definitive, linear fashion suggested by Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) model of organizational decline. The most prominent stages of decline determined by the participants were *Stage 1*: where the organization was blind to the problem and *Stage 3*: where the organization took inappropriate action(s) to address the problem. The campus, before and concurrent with its decline, engaged in prudent, strategic actions that yielded positive results for the campus, albeit un-sustained. Lastly, the district level leadership was found to be a significant factor in school decline, contributing to the numerous years of internal campus instability. **Conclusion:** The study produced findings to support research highlighting campus blindness to the problem and inappropriate actions to address the problem as key factors in school decline. The results of the study suggest a need for further research on the topic of school decline and for reflection at the district and campus leadership levels to engage in strategic and partnered practices over time to interrupt and redirect school decline.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

The responsibility to ensure a high-quality education for every child is an overwhelming one. States for decades have been charged to meet the needs of all children, and they continue to work toward this goal, particularly in schools that regularly face a lack of academic opportunity and low student achievement. Historically not purposed to ensure that all received the highest quality education, public education is, to-date, still challenged by opportunity gaps among minority and low socioeconomic status (SES) populations.

Schools of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, recipients of both public and at times private funds, served primarily as assistants to the home, sites to develop apprenticeships, and promoters of white male values and educational development (Anderson, 1988; Katz, 1987; Murphy, 1998). Subsequently, sparked by the following key factors: urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and distinct antebellum democratic politics, the scope, role, and overall organization of schooling were transformed by the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into compulsory, free, and formalized educational systems (Katz, 1987; Race Forward, 2006). Promoters of formalized systems, such as Massachusetts lawmakers who first passed the state's compulsory education law (Race Forward, 2006), argued for public education to address and attack some of the ills of the nation brought about by the key factors, such as the increasing ethnic/cultural heterogeneity, urban poverty and crime, lack of a trained and disciplined industrial workforce, and the crisis of social development among adolescent youth who resided in towns and cities (Anderson, 1988; Kaestle, 1983; Kaestle & Smith, 1982; Katz,

1987). The same policies that created the educational systems of mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the intent to educate the citizenry of the United States ensured that education primarily benefited those perceived to be ethnically and intellectually superior to the minority populations. As a result, policymakers ensured the overarching focus of education for immigrants, African Americans, and children of poverty was to civilize these youths to conform to the prescribed social order and American moral standards more so than to provide the highest education (Anderson, 1988; Kaestle, 1983; Katz, 1987).

Despite efforts to limit educational opportunity for minorities and impoverished youth through oppressive Jim Crow legislation, the push from the underserved communities to promote educational equity and achievement gained momentum for decades after the Civil War. As a result, in 1954, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* abolished separate and unequal practices among racially segregated schools and shone a spotlight on the educational disparities minorities, particularly African Americans, suffered (*Brown v. Board*, 1954). In theory, this legislation should have put an end to the gross inequities outlined in the case; however, as continued anti-immigrant, anti-African American political rhetoric worked to unravel inclusive policies over the decades that followed, under both Democratic and Republican leadership, the need surfaced for concrete achievement data to identify and ultimately publish student progress or the lack thereof.

In response to this need, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 increased the nation's focus on quality education and academic performance through government regulation (Brinson, Kowal, & Hassel, 2008). The first national assessments

on student literacy, numeracy, and knowledge in other core content were held in 1969 through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012); the 1983 *Nation at Risk* publication under President Reagan's administration increased attention on declining student performance relative to the world, and the government reacted in panic to augment school reform with changes to academic content and standards, the school day, teacher compensation and expectations, leadership, and government fiscal support. The National Commission on Excellence in Education shared alarming data on literacy and numeracy skills, declining test scores, increases in enrollment in remedial courses at the university level, and the negative impact these factors had on the business and military sectors. The publication sparked a national call to improve education to secure America's place among global competitors and restore it to its former "preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12; Strauss, 2018). Unfortunately, nearly two decades after *A Nation at Risk*, student achievement, particularly of minority and low SES categorized student populations, remained in the gap, and clusters of inner-city, low-performing schools were on the national and international radar.

In 2002, with the onset of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the Bush administration prioritized the use of government resources to turn around its lowest-performing schools ("State Education," 2015). Numerous programs and initiatives were heavily funded with millions of dollars to support this effort, and some changes for the better did occur. Unfortunately, despite the mandates and millions in state funding, students in many public institutions nationwide continue to fall short of the expectations that will lead them in the direction of post-secondary success. In this age of *de facto*



segregation and perceived “equal educational opportunity” as promoted by devotees of school choice and voucher options (Darling-Hammond, 2013), some students in the public educational setting thrive, while others, namely Black and Brown children and those of low socioeconomic status, are relegated to substandard educational environments, disparities in fiscal support, and human capital shortages that negatively impact achievement. U.S. public school students are still dropping out. Marginalized students of color find themselves suffering disproportionately in low-performing neighborhood schools, and yet there exist pockets of schools where poor, minority, and underserved students meet or exceed the achievement expectations. These anomalous results are found many times in what are known as turnaround schools (Harris, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Turnaround schools are characterized as once low-performing campuses which experience shifts in leadership, learning, accountability, and capacity that ultimately attribute to their success. Unfortunately, not all positive changes on turnaround campuses are sustained long-term. A combination of factors has allowed schools to improve, reaching the tipping point toward success (Gladwell, 2002). Those same schools, sadly, once the critical factors are no longer in place or even detectable, shift back into their low performing status.

In 2009, the Obama administration also initiated turnaround school efforts. The administration aimed to “‘turnaround’ 5,000 of the nation’s lowest performing schools over a five-year period” with approximately \$5 billion in federal support to failing public schools from the School Improvement Grant program (SIG) (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010; Renee & Trujillo, 2012). Campuses were required to focus their reform on one of four efforts: turnaround, transformation, restart, or closure.

Publications and research literature since the government's intervention have discussed ad nauseam the first and more popular effort, school turnaround, which espouses change based primarily on a deficit model of thinking dating back to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Brady, 2003; Duke, 2006; Harris et al., 2010; Murphy, 2008, 2010). Although mission statements tout schools' commitment to teach all students, the harsh reality stands that even after investing what equates now to billions of dollars in hopes to improve schools, marginalized students of color and those from low SES backgrounds remain typically on the losing end of school achievement (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

Nonetheless, there are accounts throughout the nation of school leaders who possess the right talents, temperament, and training to mobilize schools to success. These leaders are not solely responsible for turning a school around, though they hold one of the most significant roles. Interestingly, however, the leader who directs the change may not be best suited to sustain that success. In fact, studies suggest that the same leaders who have moved schools in a positive direction could be the very ones to hinder further progress by remaining at the campus once it is turned around (Duke, 2007). Voluminous research exists that outlines steps for leaders to move schools toward higher achievement, but the research remains quite limited on the topic of school decline, its triggers and direct consequences for students, teachers, and leaders (Duke, 2006; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008).

### **Background of the Problem**

Educators and leaders may contend that one can best learn how to succeed from examples of successful leaders. To counter, through understanding the failures, the ebb

and flow nature of public schools, emerging leaders can learn just as much that will equip them to arrest “the downward spiral of academic decline” or reverse the cycle of decline altogether (Duke, 2006). Hochbein (2011), noted for his research on issues surrounding school turnaround and decline, asserts the need for researching school decline concomitantly with positive trends. He argues:

...when a public school fails, the imperative to improve seems to overshadow the necessity to search for factors related to or responsible for the demise. Instead of diagnosing the origins of failure, educational reformers rely upon their beliefs, judgments, and “causal stories” to implement change. (Hochbein, 2011, p. 282)

Hochbein notes in his effort to further justify the need for studies on school decline that even though many educational reform strategies are widely accepted, their foundations rely largely upon assumptions, lacking noteworthy qualitative and/or quantitative research, to explain both “pathologies and remedies” of school decline and ultimate failure (2011, p. 282).

The history of the phenomenon of school decline connects to research on civilization decline, sports team decline, and largely organizational decline in the world of business (Diamond, 2005; Kanter, 2004; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). Organizations in decline react to the decline through extreme consequences ranging from complete inaction to scapegoating, firing, even closures, not unlike the dynamics in urban schools. These business and other industry practices have funneled down to similar effects in low performing urban schools today. Relationships between leaders and teachers become strained, and professionals operate in fearful and unstable school conditions. Decline is imminent, especially when the school is shrouded in deficit-thinking and victim-blaming.

Campuses with this school of thought have been known to attribute school decline to “changing demographics” (Duke, 2006, p. 731; Duke, 2008), a politically correct term used to veil the deeply held belief that students of color, low socioeconomic status, and/or limited- or non-English speaking students are to blame (Yosso, 2005), despite the fact that the nation’s history denotes centuries of value-laden systemic and political practices which have worked to maintain the opportunity gap. The school leaders and teachers then feel absolved of their responsibility to the students and cease to reflect on factors within the organization’s scope of control. Changing demographics alone are an insufficient and unacceptable explanation of school decline. Though external issues have been linked to declines in organizations, the responses to the decline or threat thereof have played a more significant role in the motion toward decline. Organizational decline has also been linked to various internal “pathologies,” characteristics and actions of the leader that impact the environment he/she creates: (a) communication, (b) criticism and blame, (c) respect, (d) isolation, (e) focus inward, (f) rifts and inequities, (g) initiative, (h) aspirations, (i) negativity (Kanter, 2004). Such pathologies also warrant further study among public educational institutions. Alongside these pathologies lies a lack of school achievement and success due to ill-prepared, unskilled, culturally unresponsive leadership practices (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Unsustainable school success is a critical issue that continues to face public education, especially within communities of color, poverty, and limited English language proficiency. Despite decades of immense funding supports from local, state, and federal entities and the mass policies and initiatives aimed at improving school achievement over

time, research suggests that school performance has unfortunately attained both short-lived (Harris et al., 2010) and “questionable success” (Hochbein, 2012). Once these campuses reach a level of laudable achievement, they are no longer as carefully monitored as they once were when identified as low performing. School achievement results eventually reach a tipping point into decline, negatively impacting students, teachers, the reputation of the campus, school pride, and a myriad of other entities (Gladwell, 2002). Schools then become susceptible to community scrutiny, declining confidence from all stakeholders, and an inundation of advertised programs preying upon the campuses desperate to raise scores and meet minimum standards. This downward spiral then becomes extremely difficult to interrupt.

To date, the phenomenon of school decline has remained understudied in the qualitative arena, arguably due to a variety of reasons ranging from methodological challenges and philosophical biases that skew findings (Hochbein, 2012), to perhaps the reluctance or fear of leaders to expose themselves to scrutiny in a formalized research setting (Duke, 2008). Even so, the problems associated with un-sustained school success still plague our 21<sup>st</sup> century schools in America. It is important that a qualitative study be conducted from the perspective of professionals in the trenches, particularly at the most critical leadership roles, to hopefully identify and describe the predictors and consequences of this phenomenon. Professionals both within and outside of the ground zero school environment may then better understand complexities surrounding school decline in urban schools that could ultimately inform them of solutions to the problems.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Due to the research gap in school decline, the investigator aims to thoroughly examine the experiences of turnaround campus and district leaders of an urban comprehensive high school within a large urban school district to glean insight into actions and conditions that may have predicted school decline. For two years prior to the 2009-10 school year, Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS) was identified as Academically Unacceptable by the state education agency. In the subsequent two years, RCHS began trending upward in overall ELA, mathematics and science assessment scores under its new principal leadership, despite the school's high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The campus earned Academically Acceptable status. The graduation rate of students in this community school also increased by double digits percentage points. By the fourth year, in 2012-13, achievement declined, and the campus was categorized under the state's newly labelled and lowest accountability rating of Improvement Required (IR). Core content test scores from the state assessments of that year fell from 17 to 33 points below the district averages. An important question stands: what led to the school's decline?

The purpose of this case study is to identify and describe the predictable stages of school decline through the diverse perspectives of five school leaders including on-campus administration and teacher leaders. Data collection will include interviews and archival records of the target campus from the school district and state reporting agency. The findings aim to enhance the body of research surrounding the internal and external factors contributing to school decline.

**Significance to the Field**

The field of educational research will be enhanced, hopefully stimulating further empirical studies on this topic as the investigator looks at archival descriptive school data and engages with critical leaders of the targeted campus that were present during and/or prior to the negative achievement shift. Findings from this research will potentially inform and guide effective practices of educational leaders of similar campus experiences so they may intervene prior to decline or reverse the downward trajectory of school achievement. Aspiring principals may also gain access to invaluable new knowledge by exploring the dynamics surrounding school decline and its specific connections to leadership or the lack thereof. Lastly, prominent decision makers at the school district and policy-making levels who develop district hiring protocols and support systems for school leaders may be able to consider these findings to further examine their own hiring practices toward ensuring the right leader is chosen for a campus with similar attributes.

**Researcher Perspective**

The topic of school success and decline is one that has immense meaning for me. I was frustrated in the affluent schools in which I taught, because students of color were rarely placed in the more challenging classes, falling victim to a school caste system of sorts. I was frustrated in the urban schools because adults who looked like the students they served held expectations just as low as some of their White counterparts. School cultures on both ends of the achievement spectrum seemed to believe that certain students were incapable of critical thought and high achievement. I am a firm believer that the campus leader and the leadership team play an integral part in the success, decline, or failure of a school, and that it is a combination of shared belief in all student ability, first,

then the internal and external characteristics of the campus that are responsible for positive school and student outcomes.

I have witnessed the disappointing cycle of decline and its impact on children and communities. I was fortunate enough to teach in minority-majority classrooms where the students were assigned “regular” courses. My students were able to experience comparable successes and achievement to their Pre-AP counterparts because I did not dilute the curriculum for my students. While working in an urban high school known for low performance, I still challenged students to do honors-level work. Before learning anything about growth vs. fixed mindset thinking, I exercised practices that supported growth mindset, data-driven/results-oriented decision making and student support. Nonetheless, my experience was microcosmic. I later joined a team of female, African American leaders to design and serve in a high school that successfully challenged status quo practices that historically stifled minority achievement, and our students met noticeable academic successes.

I have taught and led in campuses where learning was abased and where students abound in urban high schools. Students in clusters of community schools would show marked improvements in test scores and graduation rates, only to decline within a year or two. It was difficult to witness the students with the same demographic profile succeed in some settings and fail in others. As a result, I seek a deeper understanding of this topic of school decline. Fully aware of my context and strongly held beliefs, however, I must be mindful of my engagement with the participants of the study. Whether or not my beliefs align with the interview stories or the storytellers themselves, I will maintain



objectivity and not impose my opinion, verbally or nonverbally, to secure authentic responses.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study is to identify and describe the predictable stages of school decline through post facto analysis of the diverse perspectives of five school leaders including on-campus administration and teacher leadership. The key research questions for this study are as follows:

1. In what way(s) was the organization *blind* to early stages of decline?
2. In what way(s) did the organization *recognize* the need for change but took no action?
3. In what way(s) did the organization take action, but the *action was inappropriate*?
4. In what ways did the organization reach a point of *crisis*?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are defined to provide the meaning of or usage of specific terms used in this study:

#### *Academically (Un)acceptable (AU/AA)*

Academically Unacceptable and Academically Acceptable monikers were the lowest and next-to-lowest state accountability ratings assigned to campuses and districts in the Texas public education system annually. These rating labels were based on indicators of performance including completion rates, dropout percentages, and state assessment. These rating were no longer used after 2011 with the arrival of a new state assessment (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

### *Improvement Required (IR)*

Improvement Required (IR) is one of the newer state accountability ratings for a district or campus which denotes the lowest performance. This rating went into effect August 2013 (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

### *Organizational Decline*

Organizational decline is an environmental condition in which a “substantial, absolute decrease in an organization’s resource base occurs over a specific period of time” (Cameron, Kin, & Whetton, 1987; Cameron, Sutton, Whetton, 1988; D’Aventi, 1989; Hochbein, 2011, p. 288). It is also defined as the final stage of the organizational life cycle before actual “collapse” occurs (Duke, 2008, p. 47).

### *Pathologies*

Pathologies is a term in the context of this study that refers to malfunctioning conditions of the leader or leadership characteristics that contribute to performance decrease of an organization.

### *Reconstitution*

According to the National Education Association, reconstitution is a term that refers to a risky reform strategy to “turn around chronically low-performing schools” (Rice & Malen, 2010, vii). This strategy aims to improve the human capital on the campus by replacing staff, from administration and teachers to paraprofessionals and support staff who are believed to be better capable of improving student achievement.

### *Turnaround*

Turnaround is one of four models of school restructuring under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for

five consecutive years. Under this restructuring of the low-performing campuses, shifts in leadership, learning, accountability, and capacity ultimately attribute to improvement in student learning and achievement (Brinson et al., 2008). Turnaround also refers to “a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that (a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and (b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performance organization” (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007, p. 4).

### *School Decline*

School decline is the “process by which a school’s ability to accomplish its student achievement goals diminishes over time. This process represents the continuing failure of a school to respond adequately to challenges that threaten student achievement (Duke, 2008, p. 49).

### **Limitations**

It is a difficult task to study a campus while it is in the midst of decline. Therefore, this study examines the phenomenon of school decline through a post facto analysis. There is always a risk of selective memory of the participants who will respond to the interview questions; however, the interview questions will hopefully probe sufficiently to stimulate the most thoughtful responses.

### **Chapter I Summary**

While studies run the gamut on the issue of turnaround schools, raising standards, and improving school practices to meet achievement goals, the research is limited on the topic of school decline and all the dynamics and pathologies associated with them. A qualitative study of school leaders’ perceptions of school decline and its predictors is

necessary and can contribute to the fields of research in educational leadership and organizational change. Chapter II will explain the theories associated with the phenomenon to be studied. Chapter III will provide details of research methods employed, participants in the case study and method and rationale of data collection. Chapter IV will share the findings from the study and synthesize the qualitative data into emerging themes. The final chapter will summarize the qualitative study and disclose implications for future research, district practices, and campus leadership.

### **Chapter II Overview**

Chapter II will explore turnaround leadership and its internal and external aspects that contribute to school outcomes, particularly school decline. The chapter will also review research on civilization, sports teams, and organizational decline which influence qualitative and quantitative research on school decline and characteristics of school leaders. Chapter II aims to explain in detail the literature and its direct connections to school decline and other specific organizational consequences that ensue from leadership practices.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

A scarcity exists in current literature of comprehensively describing the critical aspects of school decline in addition to characterizing the leaders who are the key players in the process. As a result, examination of historical research on decline through the lens of “organizational sciences” (Hochbein & Duke, 2008, p. 360) is warranted. This literature review will first explore background research on decline in the larger contexts of civilizations, private, public and specialized organizations that precede studies on turnaround schools and school decline. Next, the chapter examines the parallels of the background studies to current research on turnaround school and school decline. Lastly, the chapter concludes by identifying the research questions and the significance of this study to the prevailing body of research.

#### **Why Civilizations Decline**

Archeologist and researchers (Diamond, 2005; Good & Reuveny, 2009; Tainter, 1988) have identified a variety of overarching theories to explain societal decline which could ultimately parallel to explanations of school decline:

1. Depletion or cessation of a vital resource or resources.
2. The establishment of a new resource base.
3. The occurrence of some insurmountable catastrophe.
4. Insufficient response to circumstances.
5. Other complex societies.
6. Intruders.

7. Class conflict, societal contradictions, elite mismanagement or misbehavior.
8. Social dysfunction.
9. Mystical factors.
10. Chance concatenation of events.
11. Economic factors.

Tainter (1988), Good and Reuveny (2009) acknowledged the overlap among some of the theories of decline, but they questioned a particular argument for decline: environmental resource depletion. It could be considered farfetched, or at minimum, counterintuitive, for a complex society to consciously allow obvious environmental challenges to go unaddressed, or for a civilization to threaten its own existence by destroying its environments. Tainter (1988) reasoned:

One supposition of this view must be that these societies sit by and watch the encroaching weakness without taking corrective actions. Here is a major difficulty. Complex societies are characterized by centralized decision-making, high information flow, great coordination of parts, formal channels of command, and pooling of resources. Much of this structure seems to have the capability, if not the designed purpose, of countering fluctuations and deficiencies in productivity. With their administrative structure, and capacity to allocate both labor and resources, dealing with adverse environmental conditions may be one of the things that complex societies do best.... (p. 50)

The prevailing thought here is that it is curious that advanced civilizations would collapse when faced with certain conditions or challenges which they are supposedly well-

equipped to circumvent. It seems unlikely that complex societies would allow themselves to decline to the level of collapse through failure to manage their own environmental resources.

In contrast, other researchers of multiple societies in collapse assert the opposite (Adams, 1981; Diamond, 2005; Greer, 2005; Kirch, 2005; Yoffee & Cowgill, 1988): that civilizations indeed find themselves in decline, undermining and even destroying themselves through the damage they cause to their own environment. Some of these civilizations studied, including, but not limited to, modern America, Sumerian, Maya, Easter Island/ Rapanui, the Roman Empire, and Anasazi of pre-Columbian America, through action or inaction, committed unintentional “ecocide,” or ecological suicide (Diamond, 2005, p. 6; Greer, 2005, 2011) leading to emigration or death. Societies that are weakened ecologically fall victim to severe consequences such as disease, starvation, and even wars as “too many people fight for too few resources,” (Diamond, 2005, p. 6) and in turn, they become economically, politically, and culturally vulnerable to other forces (Culbert, 1993; Diamond, 2005; Good & Reuveny, 2009; Kirch, 2005). In addition, civilizations suffer and decline due to four specific reasons: (a) failure to anticipate an impending problem, (b) failure to recognize the problem once it arrives, (c) failure to attempt to solve the identified problem, or (d) failure to solve the problem, though an attempt was made (Diamond, 2005, p. 421; Duke et al, 2008; Good & Reuveny, 2009, p. 865; Greer, 2011). Many of these “failures” were found to be associated with poor group decision-making practices and/or sociopolitical pressures that maintain the status quo.

**Failure to anticipate a problem.** As evidenced in the problems ranging from Mayan deforestation and British colonization in Australia to French strategizing in World War II, societies and civilizations fail to anticipate a problem due to several factors. They may have no prior experience with the problem; therefore, they are not sensitized to the possibility of the problem or outcomes attributed to it. Conversely, the society may have prior experience with the problem, but the more recent decision-makers within that society lack much needed historical knowledge or perspective that could help them foresee a possible recurring issue. Lastly, the phenomenon of “reasoning by false analogy,” (Diamond, 2005, p. 423) also explains how civilizations have steered themselves into decline. When faced with unfamiliar circumstances, individuals tend to draw on old experiences and analogous solutions. The analogy strategy, however, only works if the new situation mirrors the old. Many times, it does not, and as a result, the society facing the challenge is ultimately defeated by the very problem it erroneously felt prepared to vanquish.

**Failure to see the problem once it arrives.** A second factor in civilization decline, failure to perceive the problem once it arrives, is attributed to reasons also recognized in the business and educational arenas. First, the origins and roots of the problem could be imperceptible, because the leaders/decision-makers are too busy looking at the wrong issue. Secondly, “distant managers” (Diamond, 2005, p. 434), those responsible for the stewardship of the land, the resources, etc. of that society, are physically too far removed from the work in the trenches to realize when a problem surfaces that could jeopardize the stability of the environment under their care. Lastly, and a common reason why societies fail to perceive a problem is when the problem itself



moves in the form of a slow trend, masked by larger fluctuations. Global warming and depletion of fossil fuels are examples of this “creeping normalcy” or “landscape amnesia” that occurs (Diamond, 2005, p, 435; Greer, 2011; Klein, 2015). The problematic changes that occur are so gradual that one fails to see that, as the landscape changed, it actually reflected a downward trend.

**Failure to attempt to solve the problem.** The most frequent reason for decline and collapse in societies, according to Diamond (2005) is failure to attempt to solve the problem once it is perceived. The major behaviors associated with why a society fails to work toward solutions are coined “rational” and “irrational” behaviors (p. 427-435).

One rational behavior, though considered morally appalling, is the complete selfishness enacted by the elite over the masses due to clashes of interest among the two groups. The elite make decisions motivated by profit and self-promotion, especially if they feel that consequences will not impact them because they operate, sometimes marginally, within the confines of the law or because the laws are not enforced. Another rational but undesirable behavior is the “tragedy of the commons” (p. 428). In this scenario, situations arise where too many people or self-interest groups vie for the same resources. As a result, the resources are depleted or destroyed altogether, and the best interest regarding those resources cannot be met (Diamond, 2005; Greer, 2005, 2011; Klein, 2015; Tainter, 1988).

Fortunately, examples do exist where the dire consequences have been evaded when any of the following actions occur: government intervention, sometimes unsolicited; privatization of the resources (dividing them amongst the consumers); most desirably, the self-interest groups’ recognition of their common interest, which results in

self-regulation. By not supporting an “it’s someone else’s problem” mantra, the society’s resources are respected, preserved, and left to meet the needs of future generations. Such positive outcomes, of course, require intensive commitment despite the opposition that may surface.

The rational behaviors that fail to attempt at solutions are said to exist in the interest of some and not all. The irrational behaviors, however, serve no one. Irrational behaviors develop when parties are reluctant to abandon their practices, ineffective as they may be, simply because there has been such a heavy investment made over time, or because the practices are linked to deeply-rooted core values that individuals refuse to abandon, even if they no longer serve the needs of the society. For example, researchers of modern American economic and ecological phenomena observe the conflicting nature of capitalism, the cornerstone of the nation’s economy and sustainability of natural resources (Diamond, 2005; Greer, 2011; Smith, 2016).

Other irrational motivations for not addressing a real and identified problem include issues surrounding public disdain for those who both identify and complain about the problem and conflict that exists between short-term and long-term goals for the society. In the former, the warnings and voiced concerns go ignored or dismissed altogether, simply because of an unwillingness to listen to the messenger. In the latter, focus on short term fixes instead of addressing the real issue(s) leaves the problem for the next generation to assume the responsibility of solving. The ever-expanding appetite of U.S. capitalism, for example, and the mechanisms which support its growth are diametrically opposed to the needs of national and global resources to avoid depletion (Greer, 2011; Smith, 2016). As a result, this relentless effort to produce and consume

more without regard for the warning signs by noted economists, researchers, etc. demonstrates the society's commitment to a suicide mission.

Lastly, psychological dynamics can play a significant role in the failure to act toward solving a problem. One dynamic is what psychologist Janis (1972) coined "groupthink" in which the drive for consensus stifles disagreement, with disregard for the potentially negative impact of the group decision. Another dynamic, psychological denial, is also mentioned as a speculated, not fully proven reason, for inaction toward solving the perceived problem. In this case, something undesirable is perceived; however, the individual suppresses or outright denies the perception as a form of mental self-preservation. The individual is thereby able to function in some capacity while surrounded by chaos or imminent danger (p. 435).

Both the rational and irrational behaviors can consequently create a form of paralysis in the society, where people, systems, and/or resources shut down. This thereby leads to the slowing down or collapse of steps toward advancement.

**Failure to solve the problem, despite the attempt made.** The final reason attributed to a failure of societies to solve the problem lies in the attempts made. The problem itself could exist beyond the society's current capacity to solve. It could be cost-prohibitive; the efforts exerted toward a solution are too little, too late, or the attempts backfire and exacerbate the problem. These failures could also be linked back to one of the original causes of societal decline—an inability to properly identify the problem.

Diamond (2005), in his expansive research, concludes that differences in environments more so than the societies themselves can cause more challenges for the society. He does not concede to environmental determinism, believing that the

environment predisposes the society to certain outcomes. He notes that the environment in fact does not dictate the outcome. The environment could potentially make support for the society or its ability to support itself more difficult; nonetheless, the society, based on his findings, has much of the scope to “save or doom itself by its own actions” (p. 438). Greer (2005, 2011) and Klein (2015), who built on earlier works of Tainter (1988), concede that points exist in decline or crises where those with the power to change the trajectory either (a) relinquish their dependency on societal complexities (i.e., infrastructure expansion, mass production, etc.) and choose change for the betterment of the society, or (b) they opt to continue the course toward decline, collapse even, due to the desire to maintain and increase conveniences over preserving foundationally what sustains the society.

### **Why Organizations Decline**

Studies on organization decline coincide with some factors of civilization decline. Organizations of various size and purposes are susceptible to the functions or dysfunctions of the environment and individuals. Studies discussed in this section provide explanations for why organizations fail.

**External and internal conditions.** The research on organizational decline suggests that the decline exists, in large part, because of environmental conditions or phenomena, both external and internal (Trahms, Ndofor, & Sirmon, 2013). External conditions can include sudden and sometimes unpredictable impacts to the organization, known as “environmental jolts” (Short, Ketchen, Palmer, & Hult, 2007; Trahms et al., 2013, p. 1289), technological evolution (Christensen, 1997; Dowell & Swarminathan, 2006), declines or chronic failures within the industry, and “competitive dynamics”

(Grinyer & McKiernan, 1990; van Witteloostuijn, 1998). As a result of the aforementioned dynamics, the organization finds it difficult to rebound to its previous status, and it lacks the capacity or desire to handle the new pressure placed on the entity.

Internally, conditions could include (a) stagnation within the organization (Whetten, 1988), (b) a substantial, absolute deterioration in the organizational resource base over time (Cameron et al., 1987; Cameron et al., 1988; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989), (c) some state that precedes crisis (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989), or (d) ineffective top management practices (Trahms et al., 2013, p. 1289). One formal definition of organizational decline views it as a condition of “poor adaptability, consistently depleting resources, reduced legitimacy, and high vulnerability” (Carmeli & Schaubreock, 2006, p. 364); whereas, more contemporary research considers organizational decline as a particular stage that precedes actual collapse (Duke, 2008, p. 47).

**Leadership characteristics.** While all previous definitions identify an occurrence or state prior to a level of organizational decrease, no one external factor can be considered directly responsible for the cause(s) of the state of decline. Decline, is, however, connected to internal factors, specifically behaviors and potentially detrimental characteristics on the part of leadership which negatively impact the success and viability of the organization (Trahms et al., 2013). These characteristics are known as risk-aversion and self-centeredness, (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009). A risk-aversion leader, as the name denotes, is more cautious and less inclined to make certain decisions on behalf of the organization for fear of unknown, nebulous outcomes. Such a leader practices conformity rather than proactivity and risk-taking, according to Kitron’s (1976) Adaptive-Innovation Theory. Organizations under such hesitant leadership are prone to

decline as the leader's commitment to status quo and entrenched bureaucracy overshadow innovation which is a necessary component to organizational growth and sustainability.

Another leadership characteristic which negatively impacts an organization is leadership self-centeredness, also categorized as "ethical [or] rational egoism" (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009, p. 365). Leaders embodying this characteristic not only act in their own best interest, they also feel justified in their selfish actions. Lacking the motivation or capacity to support public interest, self-centered leaders view stakeholders and the organizational environment itself as simply a means to an end, "objects to be subjugated for the benefit of personal aspirations and interests" (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009, p. 366). Self-centered leadership, conceptualized in Agency Theory (Eisenhardt, 1988), exercises opportunistic practices that are more concerned with promoting an image and propaganda than ensuring the growth of the organization. Such leaders, to keep up appearances, are capable of even denying the existence of trouble when crisis occurs within the organization to appear they are managing a healthy organization. The risk-averse leader fails to move, and the self-centered one moves entirely with ego as the focus. Both, unfortunately, are positively associated with organizational decline. The variance in the above definitions substantiates the complexity and multidimensionality of organizational decline (Cameron, et al., 1987; Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Hochbein & Duke, 2008).

**Stages of organizational decline.** The topic of organizational decline itself has a wealth of research background; however, the connections of the stages of organizational decline to school decline remain understudied. Studies cite stages and consequences associated with organizations in decline or stages of turbulence such as reactions of

leadership charged to redirect the decline and other members of the organization.

Decline and turbulence within the organization can lead to paralysis or inaction by the leadership, resistance to change, and failure to innovate. Decline can spur internal conflict among leaders and members and low morale. At high levels of turbulence and anticipated decline, practices of panic such as scapegoating, focus on short-term fixes, and leadership turnover can be a consequence (Cameron et al., 1987; Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009).

Overall, Weitzel and Jonsson (1989) developed a model to encapsulate these complexities surrounding organizational decline in five definitive stages:

1. The organization is blind to the early stages of decline.
2. The organization recognizes the need for change but takes no action.
3. The organization takes action, but the action is inappropriate.
4. The organization reaches a point of crisis.
5. The organization is forced to dissolve (Duke et al, 2008, p. 376; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989).

This framework draws parallels to studies on civilization, teams, and schools in decline.

The Weitzel and Jonsson (1989) stages will frame the research questions of this study, and the other types of decline will relate to the overarching focus of predictable stages of decline.

### **Why Teams Decline**

Teams that experience decline also have specific characteristics that surface. Sports psychologists and researchers pay close attention to responses to perceived problems mostly among sports teams when decline or failure is considered imminent.

These responses run in some ways parallel to four points of civilization decline. Nine separate pathologies are outlined, but for the sake of this review, we will identify relationships between select pathologies and the outputs that result.

**Inverse relationships among team pathologies.** Pathological, self-perpetuating patterns follow a sense of powerlessness and failure felt by organizations in decline. First, there is an inverse relationship between communication and isolation, criticism and respect (Duke et al., 2008; “How High,” 2017; Kanter, 2004). Conversations about losses induce defensiveness and anxiety, so team members tend to avoid those difficult meetings entirely, finding excuses for their avoidance. Individuals communicate that people are too busy or feel they are not authentically learning from the meetings, thereby justifying further isolation from the group. “Decreasing communication begins at the top” (Kanter, 2004, p. 99), and those at the cabinet level who are uncomfortable with vulnerability and lacking control find it difficult to reveal they may not have all the answers or that they need the expertise of the team to make moves toward success. Important information is kept in the hands of a small few, shutting out those who are most needed to propel the team forward. Effective work, problem solving, and team improvement are virtually impossible when the team is deliberately left uninformed by its leadership (Duke et al., 2008; “How High,” 2017; Kanter, 2004).

Likewise, as criticism increases, respect decreases, and vice versa. Kanter (2004) contends that teams in decline are “more than twice as likely...to indulge in blame and look for scapegoats in response to problems” (p. 100). In this case, the team loses sight of the real issues. Finger-pointing at others’ faults and weaknesses takes precedence over self-reflections and solutions-based group thinking; therefore, less effort is exerted by



members of the team. Social scientists make distinctions between constructive, informative feedback and the abovementioned more punitive feedback. Feedback interpreted as negative criticism can lead to resentment of the leaders who provide the feedback and a lack of respect for the leader, other members of the team, as well as lack of confidence in the team's ability to perform at high levels (Kanter, 2004; LaFair, 2015).

**Lack of cohesion.** More than 60 years of study have been dedicated to one of the most popular properties of team dynamics: cohesion (Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998; Carron & Eys, 2012; Carron, Widmeyer, & Brawley, 1985; Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1963; Gross & Martin, 1952; Kanter, 2004). In exercise and sports-related research, specifically, a highly accepted definition of team cohesion is “a dynamic process which is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (Carron et al., 1998, p. 213) Of the many behaviors that are practiced among winning and losing teams, those on the losing side are “four times as likely to tell that their teams or work groups rarely pull together or present a unified image” (Kanter, 2004, p. 105). More in-fighting exists than meaningful collaboration, which begets internal rivalries, cliques, and recognition of individuals over group accomplishments. A lack of this critical element is a major reason why sports teams relapse into widening rifts and growing inequities among its members. Teams and their leaders begin to rely solely on their stars over the ability, talent, and potential of the group, and they find themselves not winning as regularly as those in which everyone contributes and commits to the whole, even engaging in self-sacrificing behaviors (Carron et al., 1998; Eys & Kim, 2017; Kanter, 2004). In the winning teams, the stars are expected to contribute to the team, not

overshadow it, and each member of that team is valued for the talents and tenacity he/she brings to the table. It is imperative to note that for cohesion to be an asset to the team, the team must bond through a common purpose, a shared vision. Cohesion limited to the social-emotional level can actually pose a threat to the productivity of the team (Eys & Kim, 2017).

**Diminishing aspirations, low expectations.** Diamond's (2005) mention of psychological effects of decline (2005) compares to team studies. Teams in and at risk of decline tend to lower their expectations as well as their standards of performance. They become more willing to accept mediocrity than to work toward collective excellence. Teams participate in what psychologists term "defensive pessimism" (Kanter, 2004, p. 108), setting low expectations as a coping mechanism to guard against the anxiety that accompanies having to address and problem-solve for risky situations.

**Decreasing initiative.** The pessimists find excuses for failure, deny responsibility for declining achievement of the team, and ultimately fall into a state of learned helplessness. They possess an external locus of control, believing their fate lies in the hands of outside forces like luck, not in the power of their own behaviors and attributes (Kanter, 2004, p. 209; Rotter, 1954; Wakeman, 2015). The question becomes, what is the point in trying if what we do does not change the situation for the better?

Overall, teams, just as larger societies, have the capacity to develop and collapse. While external circumstances can always have an impact, ultimately, the mindset and the behaviors of the team and its leadership have a significant role in determining its destiny. In sum, organizational, team, and civilization decline reveal overlaps that directly connect to the research on school decline (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Comparison of Decline Factors*

	Civilization Decline	Organizational Decline	Team Decline	School Decline
Leading Researcher(s)	Tainter (1988); Diamond (2005)	Weitzel & Jonsson (1989)	Kanter (2004)	Brookover & Lezotte (1979); Hochbein & Duke (2008)
Leader Characteristics	Distant manager; elitist	Self-centered or risk-aversion leadership	prideful; relays punitive feedback; poor communicator	lacking: vision, focus, commitment to education for all, ability to cultivate external relationships
Blindness to Problem	Denial that a problem exists; Imperceptible decline	Focus on the wrong issue due to inexperience or rigidity	Unclear vision Lack of cohesion and planning	failure to recognize early signs; distracted
Failure to Act	Groupthink; Elite ignores needs of the masses	Ignore problem; risk-aversion/ status quo pressure	Defensive pessimism; learned helplessness by team	failure to respond to student and school needs
Inappropriate Actions	Focus on short- term fixes; Use wrong strategies to address problem(s);	Ineffective top management practices; Issue addressed with self- promotional motives	Poor communication; internal conflicts/ rivalries distract from focus;	Use of antiquated or ineffective strategies, resources, etc. to address need
Point of Crisis	Ecocide; Genocide; panic	Unpredictable impacts or devastating jolts to organization	Repeated team loses	Official mandates; demographic and/or personnel shifts; declining achievement

## Why Schools Decline

School decline was first operationally defined by Brookover and Lezotte (1979) in the late 1970s in their concentrated Michigan study on staff perceptions about specific aspects of the declining school: organizational structure, functions, instruction, culture, and climate (Edmonds, 1979; Hochbein, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). The study, which used interviews and questionnaires to gather data revealed the following characteristics of the declining campuses in comparison to improving schools:

- Less emphasis on reading and mathematics objectives
- Lacking belief that all students can master objectives
- Lower academic expectations
- Less commitment of teachers and principal to teaching reading and math skills
- Lower locus of control among teachers and staff
- Principal was more permissive and informal
- Campus less willing to accept that the state assessment is one measure of effectiveness
- More staff satisfaction due to complacency
- Lower levels of parent-initiated involvement
- More teacher time spent on planning for non-compensatory reading activities/programs (i.e., reading interventions and support) (Edmonds, 1979, p. 18-20)

Interestingly, one might assume that teachers are happier at an effective or improving school. The study by Brookover and Lezotte (1979), however, suggests more

contentment with the status quo in declining and lower performing schools. School improvement or maintaining high achievement requires a level of deliberate, strategic, and persistent focus on student achievement and mastery. Such work is more difficult and more stressful than continuing in practices that do not propel students to higher levels of academic success.

### **Background Studies**

School decline remains an understudied phenomenon, yet earlier studies initiated much needed dialogue on the topic. Hochbein and Duke (2008) provided findings on school decline from public schools in California and New York. Studies on elementary and middle schools from the Dana Center of the University of Texas, which focused on turnaround school issues, sparked further interest in the topic of school decline.

**California and New York studies on school decline.** Early studies of school decline appeared as case studies in the 1980s of San Jose High School in California and three New York public schools. The findings in the study were determined to be rudimentary but began to formalize a model of decline (Figure 1). The research uncovered a series of challenges and conditions contributing to decline, followed by identification of the consequences of those challenges and conditions (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). In the California study, the author noted the passing of Proposition 13, which limited property tax increases, and the extreme, swift slicing of school budgets as factors which significantly impacted student achievement, leading the campus, highly dependent on state funds, on its path to decline. In this case, the budget cuts caused immediate cuts in teaching staff, thereby overextending the teaching and support staff which was forced to increase class size.

Some members of the campus staff were even forced, for the sake of job security, to teach in areas they were not originally designed or readily prepared to assume. The main catalyst, budget cuts, triggered a snowball effect of problems, mostly centered around teacher engagement and challenges to their ability to focus on instruction and student learning, which led to the consequence of school decline (Duke 2008).

In the mid-to-late 70s, researchers determined in New York City schools that budget cutbacks themselves were not directly responsible for school decline. The cuts, however, catapulted already financially strapped schools to resort to retrenchment practices within the school. With the limited resources, departments, teachers, and administrators were vying for the same funding to support their programming, a situation not unlike that of civilizations in decline in which “too many people fight for too few resources” (Diamond, 2005, p. 6), and in turn, they become economically, politically, and culturally vulnerable to other forces (Culbert, 1993; Diamond, 2005; Good & Reuveny, 2009; Kirch, 2005). The findings here supported the premise that urban schools that are “already facing criticism for lower-than-expected achievement” (Duke, 2008, p. 53) are further threatened when their ability to maintain a focus on student achievement is compromised by depleting resources and in-fighting for those resources.

**Texas studies on school decline.** In the late 90s and early 2000s, the Dana Center of University of Texas conducted case studies of turnaround elementary and middle schools which uncovered conditions which preceded the turnaround. While the studies did not directly examine school decline, portions of the study identified negative conditions which the campus had to address and surmount for turnaround to occur. While the studies could not give more weight to one condition over another, the

researchers were able to cluster the issues into three primary categories: school program and organization, staffing, and parents and community (Johnson & Asera, 1999; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002).

### Model of School Decline

Parallel to the civilization, team, and organization decline studies, school decline challenges involve issues surrounding both external factors outside the scope of control of the campus and its leadership, and conditions, the internal factors, specifically failures at various levels within the organization, to respond to those challenges.

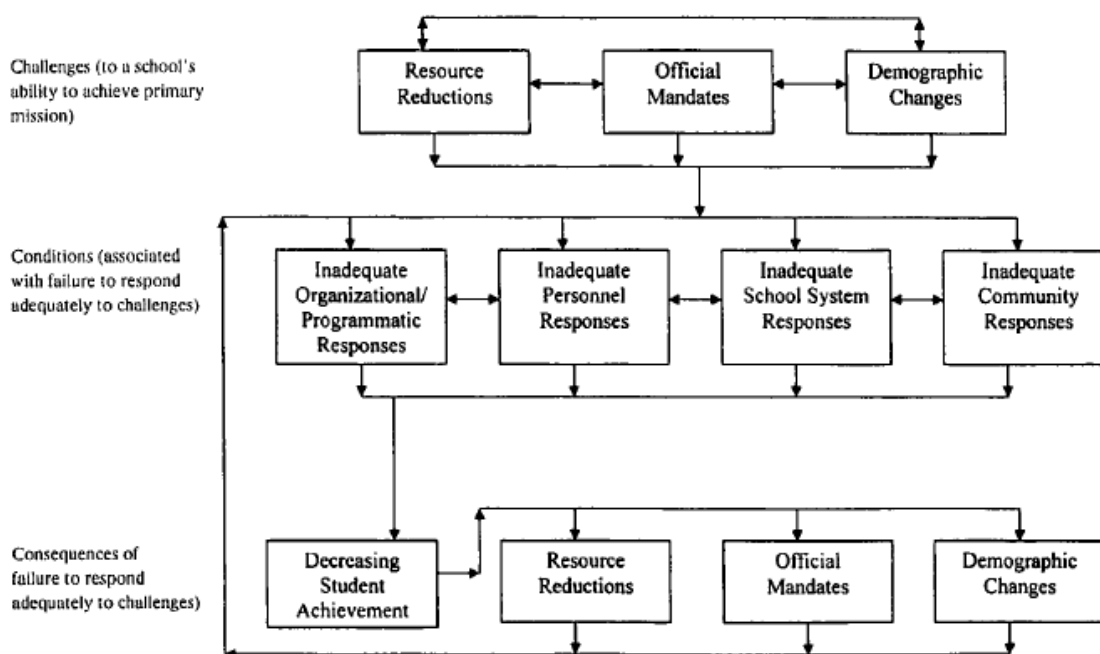


Figure 1. Model of School Decline (Duke, 2008, p. 63). The vectors equal possible causal relationships.

**Demographic changes.** As seen in Figure 1, in Duke's model of school decline, Duke interestingly ascertains that demographic changes within the school can factor in as both a noted challenge to the campus as well as a consequence to the school due to its inability to respond adequately to one or more of the challenges as listed above. While

demographic shifts in communities happen, it is the responsibility of the school district, key community stakeholders and community school decision makers to understand, even anticipate trends to prepare themselves to meet any possible resource needs within the school that do not currently exist.

**Inadequate responses to challenging conditions.** The model also shows how inadequate responses to the challenges threaten school decline. The model mentions personnel response and does not specify which members of personnel. This lack of specificity may serve as a rationale for further research to identify the individuals whose decision making makes the largest impact on negative student achievement and school decline. Duke (2008) identifies and explains 11 “early indicators associated with inadequate and inappropriate responses by the school” (p. 668). Some indicators will cluster or overlap, depending on the scenario. For example, Duke notes a school may risk decline should they experience a sudden influx of students who require special education or limited English service without an increase in funding or adequate staffing, or because of new state mandates, veteran teachers are strongly encouraged to retire. The 11 early indicators are as follows: undifferentiated assistance, inadequate monitoring of progress, unadjusted daily schedule, curriculum alignment problems, ineffective staff development, lost focus, lack of leadership, hasty hiring, increased class size, overreliance on untrained helpers, more rules and harsher punishments. One must note, however, that Duke (2008) asserts the decline is not directly linked to the challenges themselves but rather how inappropriately the leader and/or the organization may respond to the challenges.



## **Contemporary Studies**

The leading 21<sup>st</sup> century researchers who have raised awareness of the importance of looking at school decline, Hochbein and Duke (2008), provided historical perspective, identified common indicators of school decline, possible reasons for the shortage of extensive educational research on the topic, and they discussed implications for the field of educational leadership. Hochbein (2012) determined that much research exists about school turnaround and chronically low-performing campuses also known as drop-out factories and how to help them improve; however, studies that address “equally dramatic declining academic performance” of once higher performing schools or turnaround sustainability are very limited, qualitatively and quantitatively (p. 92). Despite marked improvement with turnaround efforts, the question remains from critics if turnaround efforts are even sustainable or could possibly transform schools to produce long-term positive outcomes for children (Hochbein, 2012).

Regarding historical elements, only smatterings of other literature about school decline and ineffective practices span over four decades, from studies in the early 70s on effective school outliers (Klitgaard & Hall, 1973) to the present. “Few researchers have intentionally and empirically examined schools in decline” (Hochbein, 2012), justifying a strong rationale to increase studies that expand knowledge in the field about the topic and about those who directly lead campuses experiencing cycles of success then decline.

Hochbein (2012) continued his investigation of school decline in a longitudinal study from 2003 to 2008 of the effects of significant changes in school performance on turnaround and downfall schools. His study determined a peak in performance of the turnaround schools in year three, only to observe declining achievement thereafter. Most

schools in the study, despite the decline, fortunately did not return to their former lowest performance. Hochbein (2012) concluded that “studying schools that regress after a period of turnaround provides useful insights into how practitioners and policy makers might work to sustain the turnaround process or initiate a second wave of improvements” (p. 104). To date, the phenomenon of school decline has remained understudied in the qualitative arena, possibly due to a variety of reasons ranging from methodological challenges and philosophical biases that could skew findings (Hochbein, 2012), to perhaps the unwillingness or fear of leaders to expose such vulnerability in a formalized research setting. Even so, the problem still exists in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools and warrants study.

The major indicators of school decline are the mirror opposite of paradigms associated with successful urban school principals. The leader’s campus sliding into decline lacks critical internal factors overall: clear direction, an optimal learning environment, and focus on learning and achievement (Duke, 2008). Duke also observed the following to be one of the most important problems associated with decline: key people “recognizing [the] signs early on and promptly applying appropriate interventions” (Duke, 2008). A dearth of research still exists around school decline because of the vulnerability schools and leaders must be willing to subject themselves to for the greater good. Duke posits that schools are reluctant to be seen under such a microscope of scrutiny. This reluctance has led to potentially grave results for students and schools. Duke was also able to pinpoint eleven indicators of decline, including, but not limited to, undifferentiated assistance to struggling students, inadequate monitoring, ineffective staff development, loss of focus, lack of leadership, overreliance of untrained

helpers, and imposition of harsher punishments (Duke, 2008). All of the indicators link heavily to internal factors within the scope of control of leadership with attention to some external pressures outside of the control of leadership. As the research director for the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Program, Duke did not claim his indicators to be an exhaustive list, but they would be a helpful starting point to imminent research on this important topic. While Duke (2008) notes there are some "low performing schools [that] do not experience decline because they have never performed well," (p. 667), the researcher recognizes that some historically low-performing campus, like Rise Comprehensive High School, cannot be discounted from the pool of studied campuses because of its cycle of documented gains and decline. The lacking body of knowledge and research into how and why low-performing schools experience their cycle of gains and declining achievement may be the very reason those school remain low performing.

One should note that "decreasing student achievement" (p. 63) typically refers to the performance on measures within the current educational systems such as standardized state exams, graduation rates, college readiness, etc., with the heaviest weight being attributed to passing rates on state exams relative to standards determined by the state education agency. Unfortunately, as the passing rate baseline changes in any given year, so can the achievement or perception of achievement for a campus. If the state education agency mandates a low baseline score as passing, one could question if adequate achievement can even be determined, because the bar is set low.

## **The Leader and Decline**

**Leadership characteristics and skills.** Although specific skills are required for a campus principal to lead a turnaround, and particularly turnaround-urban school, there are four overarching characteristics and practices of the leader which contribute to the positive achievement results of successful schools: communication of clear leadership direction, focus on learning, creation of optimal learning environments for students, and cultivation of external relationships and support (Chenoweth, 2009; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010; Knapp, Feldman, & Yeh, 2013; Parrett & Budge, 2009; Robinson & Buntrock, 2011). Also, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), in a meta-analysis of 69 studies on leadership, determined 21 leadership characteristics which yielded the highest achievement results, from a correlation coefficient (r) of .33 to .25. The top five characteristics were situational awareness (.33), flexibility (.28), discipline, monitoring/evaluation, and outreach (.27) When one or more of these high-impact characteristics is lacking and others on the leadership team cannot compensate for the primary leader's deficit, decline will likely follow.

**Perceptions of leader and impact on achievement.** In addition to researching the leader skillset and action, it is imperative to consider the literature about other campus leaders' perceptions of the principal, the organization itself and the students. Recent studies have determined the importance of "follower perceptions" of their leaders (Oyer, 2015, p. 692) and their impact on teacher efficacy. Teachers prefer their leader's characteristics to include certain affective strengths: humility, honesty, competence, flexibility, confidence in one's own leadership as well as teachers' ability, characteristics also evident in transformational leaders (Givens, 2008). When followers are motivated

by transformational leaders who influence, motivate, stimulate intellect, and demonstrate consideration for people and context, outcomes of the organization served are positive (Givens, 2008). Likewise, when teachers perceive that the leaders lack those skills, or that their confidence is inflated, then leaders tend to have difficulty building their teams and yield organizational success (Oyer, 2015).

## **Chapter II Summary**

Our communities, our nation, cannot afford the perpetual short-term successes and long-term failures of our secondary schools, the gateway organizations which release our young people into the “real world.” There is a legitimate need for practitioners and scholars to do more in depth research from the perspective of key players of the school instructional team at turnaround or chronically low-performing schools that fall victim to decline. The current literature affirms it, the current state of low performing and declining schools demands it, and our future generations will hopefully benefit from it.

The most significant and common threads among the research on decline relate to the following phenomena among leadership and key decision-makers within schools risking and experiencing decline: blindness to the problem, misdiagnosis of the problem, ineffectively addressing the problem, failure to act accordingly when the problem arises, internal and external environmental challenges that hinder progress toward achievement.

National research on decline in these contexts at the high school level is particularly lacking. As a result, the investigator’s study of Rise Comprehensive High School will examine and hopefully uncover predictable stages that led to the school’s decline. The interview findings from the post facto analysis of the school’s decline will seek a deeper understanding of this very complex issue that impacts schools today:

becoming blind to the early stages of decline, failing to act, taking inappropriate action(s), reaching a point of crisis.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will detail the methodology of this study. Prominent case study researchers emphasize the importance of a well-defined methodology to help shape a case study design (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). This chapter includes the following methodology components: research design and questions, participant and site selections, access, rapport, and sampling, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness of this study.

#### **Research Design**

A descriptive case study design approach was conducted to examine and describe predictable stages of school decline during the five-year window of the school improvement and decline from 2009 to 2014 in an urban comprehensive, turnaround high school located in Southeast Texas. This case is both single and descriptive in that the main subject of the study is the urban comprehensive high school from 2009 to 2014, and the purpose is to “describe a phenomenon,” school decline, “in a real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p. 238). The inquirer also used this approach to illustrate a relevant and current phenomenon of school decline, because it carries within it “multiple variables of potential importance” to the field of educational research (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). As argued by Yin (2014), case study research approach is a most viable one when the researcher aims to answer “how or why questions, when the inquirer has little control over events bring studies, when the object of study is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are

unclear, and when it is desirable to use multiple sources of evidence” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 28; Yin, 2014, p. 2). This study examined the issue through the lens of five individuals employed within the study window who served in various capacities of leadership and influence on the campus.

To strengthen the descriptive case study research approach, the inquirer investigated the phenomenon of school decline using a “full variety of evidence” (Merriam, 2009, p. 47), including historical school documents, descriptive school background articles, data from the state education reporting agency, and participant interviews. While historical primary and secondary documents can provide the reader with a very robust picture of an entity or an organization, the participant interviews were critical to determining emerging themes, as the researcher served as the “primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 39).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were developed from a combination of what Merriam (2009) identified as “something that perplexes and challenges the mind” (p. 58) and a “lack of information-the knowledge gap” (p. 59) that justify the need for the study. The specific, “overarching central questions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 138) were based on the following established categories from Weitzel and Jonsson’s (1989) framework of the four stages of organizational decline:

1. In what way(s) was the organization *blind* to early stages of decline?
2. In what way(s) did the organization *recognize* the need for change but took no action?



3. In what way(s) did the organization take action, but the *action was inappropriate*?
4. In what ways did the organization reach a point of *crisis*?

While the Weitzel and Jonsson framework helped to shape this study on school decline, the researcher recognized that parallels could also be drawn from the literature review findings on civilization decline, organizational decline, team decline, and earlier studies of school decline.

### **Participants Selection**

Creswell (2013) noted that in the qualitative research process, the researcher has a responsibility to draw his/her learning from the meaning the participants hold about the defined problem or issue, not the meaning the researcher holds (p. 47). As a result, it was imperative to secure participants to provide the most insight to answer the research questions. Originally, the five selected participants were to be a mid-management leader, one principal, an assistant principal, and two teachers who met the criteria of having worked on the campus during its school improvement and decline window. The final group of participants consisted of two principals, one assistant principal, and two teachers. This number of participants should satisfy the recommended sampling until “saturation or redundancy is reached” (Merriam, 2009, p. 80). The participants were selected through purposeful sampling, a method used to establish that the “units,” or people in this case, meet specific and “relevant criteria” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 270) and/or characteristics that are helpful to the study. Purpose sampling was also used to ensure that the participants were not chosen to support a predetermined account of the phenomenon studied (Schwandt, 2007), but rather to “purposefully inform an

understanding of the researched problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The researcher also employed snowball sampling, a technique where current participants aid in the recruitment of other potential participants for the benefit of the study (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Yin, 2014) and secure a total of five participants. To ensure anonymity and protection of the participants, pseudonyms of participants, the selected site, and related people, organizations, etc. were used. Specific characteristics of the participants included the following: certified teachers with three or more years of experience upon entering the window of the study, individuals who assumed one or more leadership roles on the campus, at least one male and one female to determine if emergent themes arise despite gender, at least one teacher, one assistant principal/dean, and one principal, and campus leaders with the insight into the organization’s culture, climate, structure, and practices to increase the possibility of emerging themes or stories (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, efforts to secure an interview with a mid-management district leader as indicated in the methodology section were not realized due to the lack of response to the researcher’s interview invitations; however, a second principal participant was secured via another gatekeeper who maintained a professional relationship with the former principal, long after his departure from Rise Comprehensive High School. The gatekeeper was instrumental to my establishing rapport with the participant. Table 2 details the criteria of the participants which were verified through the snowball and purposeful sampling processes, confirmation of the individual’s certification credentials using the State Board for Education Credential online database which houses the official credential records of all educators in the state, and the initial participant interview.

Table 2

*Participants & Characteristics Determined Through Purposeful Sampling*

Pseudonyms	Kathy	Simon	Moses	Tiffany	John
Title at RCHS	Elective Teacher	Math Teacher	Assistant Principal (AP)	Principal	Principal
Timeline of employment at RCHS	2009-12	2012-14	2007-12	2009-11	2011-13
Demographic info	Black female	Black male	Black male	Black female	White male
State Certification	Journalism; English;	Secondary Math; Principalship	History; Principalship	SPED; Principalship	SPED; Physical education; Principalship
Experience	12 years as teacher in public education; 9 years elective teaching, 3 ½ year teaching English	19 years teacher in Title I schools; total: 4 years as HS AP	25+ years in public education; approx. 15 as history teacher; 11 as ES and HS AP	20+ years in public education; 7 years as SPED teacher; 8 years as campus leader (AP and Principal); currently superintendent	20+ years in public education; 10 years of campus leadership (AP and Principalship); currently principal of charter school
Leadership responsibilities at RCHS	SDMC Member; interim Grad Lab Coach; NHS sponsor	Algebra I teacher and Math dept chair	Discipline, Attendance, Drop-outs, Teacher evaluation	Instructional Leader and Coach; conduit between school and community	Instructional Leader and Coach; conduit between school and community

*Note.* RCHS = Rise Comprehensive High School; SDMC= Shared Decision-Making Committee

## Site Selection

Rise Comprehensive School in Urban ISD was selected as the case study site because its campus, despite its reputation and history of continual low achievement, did, within the window of the study, achieve two cycles of school improvement and decline, based on testing accountability records and graduation rates. From 2009 to 2011, the graduation rate of the campus increased by double digits in two years, only to fall back almost to the same rate two years later. At the same time, the 2011-12 marked extremely high gains for ninth grade students, some of the highest growth percentages within the district, only to regress to dismal scores by spring 2014. Duke (2008) defines school decline as the “process by which a school’s ability to accomplish its student achievement goals diminishes over time” (p. 49). This process represents the continuing failure of a school to respond adequately to challenges that threaten student achievement. If one limits its determination of a site selection to campuses that maintain the higher scores the longest, or to time constraints longer than three years (Hochbein, 2011), then a gap in research of viable case studies will exist, because researchers will fail to look below the surface, beyond campus ratings and shorter cycles of decline to determine key factors surrounding school decline. RCHS, a campus that demonstrated notable improvements and decline twice within the window of this study, qualified as a site for a descriptive case study.

Noted researchers on the subject of school decline, Hochbein and Duke (2008), concede that student achievement should not be limited to performance data on standardized tests; however, due to the fact that most schools are profiled based upon student achievement in literacy and numeracy skills, the two determined that standardized

test scores would be a more viable tool to measure decline. The two also defined school decline operationally through two facets: time (absolute or temporal) and achievement (individual or relational). For the purpose of this case study, RCHS was a campus in a state of individual-absolute decline where “the final passing rate” along different measures such as graduation, attendance, and standardized test performance, was “less than the initial passing rate” (Hochbein, 2011, p. 291) within the window from 2009 to 2014.

### **Access, Sampling, and Rapport**

The researcher secured approval of the proposal for the study from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Urban Independent School District (UISD) (Creswell, 2013), of which Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS) is a part. Four gatekeepers were identified and contacted to gain entry into the secondary school site and access to some of the selected participants: the current RCHS principal, a current RCHS counselor who has worked at (RCHS) for over a decade, a former teacher, and a principal of a nearby neighborhood high school in the same district. The snowball sampling strategy was applied to locate the key participants. This technique assumes that the researcher can find meaningful respondents or participants through a series of referrals made within a circle of associations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). In this case, some gatekeepers were also primary individuals to initiate the snowball strategy, leading to the building of rapport with subsequent participants. The researcher then contacted all potential participants through an email invitation (Appendix A), giving them a pre-determined, reasonable period to respond to the invitation, followed by an initial phone interview. Efforts to secure an interview with a mid-management district leader were not

realized due to the lack of response to the researcher's interview invitations. As a result, the researcher secured a second principal participant who was employed during the window of the study. Building relationships and rapport are critical to qualitative studies. The participants must feel a sense of comfort with and confidence in the inquirer. This relationship began with being transparent about the content of the study, gaining permission to participate, asking initial questions of the participants to develop a sense of ease with the inquirer, and emphasizing the participants' contribution to the field of educational research. Maintaining rapport included agreeing to meet at the desired site of the participants for interviewing, granting anonymity, and permitting ongoing access to documents uncovered (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process included a set of interrelated activities to arrive at meaningful answers to the critical research questions. After determining the individuals and sites, the data collection process answers the questions of how the researcher gained access to and maintained rapport with the participants, what purposeful sampling technique(s) were employed, how all data were collected, recorded and stored, and how field issues were resolved (Creswell, 2013).

Data in this case study were gathered to include (a) public, historical documents from the state education agency, district, and school records that confirmed the cycle of school improvement and decline within the secondary campus chosen, (b) semi-structured, audiotaped and transcribed interviews of the chosen participants, and (c) researcher journaling during the study to note participant gestures and other nonverbal communications that cannot be captured via interviews. Another data set gathered was a

combination of online local news reports and interview responses by participants to establish background information on RCHS and its surrounding community. The types of questions posed in the interviews included combinations of the six types suggested by Patton (2002): questions of experience/behavior, opinion and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and background/demographics. The historical documents were statistical data such as state and national test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, disaggregated data on subpopulations, and yearly campus improvement plan artifacts that detailed the goals, measurable objectives and strategic plans. During this discovery process, however, the researcher remained open to “serendipitous discoveries” (Merriam, 2009, p. 150) that did in fact shed further light on the school decline cycle and factors not yet identified to contribute to the phenomenon studied.

The case study includes a descriptive review of background on the campus, an audit of historical documents to provide context, and facilitation of semi-structured interviews with participants who were sought through purposeful sampling. The troubling background on the RCHS campus and the surrounding community was discovered through research and collection of a series of local online news articles, 2010 United States Census data on the zip code of the campus, and information gathered from participant interviews. In order to develop “convergent evidence” (Yin, 2014, p. 121) and paint a picture of the social, political and economic context of RCHS, the researcher developed a rich description of factors corroborated by participants, that had some impact on school decline. The overall data collection began prior to and concurrent with the interview process. The testing data were located from the state education agency accountability report online database and UISD Research and Accountability central

office. The researcher searched through multiple sources—former principals, the current principal, former teacher leaders, the district research and accountability office, online resources and district watchdog websites—to locate campus improvement plans for each of the years of the study, all to no avail. Only one campus improvement plan was collected within the window of this case study. UISD provided a 2011-12 campus improvement plan from its district accountability and research department. The plan, submitted by the principal at the time, was a partially complete document. Just as the presence of information can provide insight on the organization, the lack thereof, for the selected struggling organization, was a “serendipitous discovery” (Merriam, 2009, p. 150), revealing something of significance, as well, about the phenomenon of study.

After participants selected confirmed their willingness to participate, each participant and I reviewed the content of the formal consent. Each signed the document to grant permission to be interviewed. I conducted semi-structured interviews at a location of the participants’ choosing. The first portion of the interview protocol sought background on the participant, the school community, and his/her journey to RCHS. The second portion of the interview asked semi-structured interview questions from the interview protocol (Appendix B).

The researcher recorded all interviews digitally, and field notes during the interview were taken by the researcher to capture non-verbal communication of the participants or elements of the interview that provoked interest. Subsequently, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings by a third-party entity. Post-interview, transcriptions and emerging codes and themes interpreted by the researcher were shared with participants to give them an opportunity to confirm the statements and the intention



in their statements were accurately captured. All transcripts were de-identified and input into a recommended Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program, Dedoose, for codifying and data organizing purposes (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

**Interviews.** Each interview had a particular focus. The protocol consisted of two interviews. Interview one was performed to establish trust with the participant, emphasize the contribution of the participants responses to enhancing the body of qualitative research on the phenomenon of school decline, and to determine historical context on RCHS and the surrounding community. Interview two focused on internal and external factors contributing to the school decline as they related to the four key research questions. Once the date and time of the face-to-face, semi-structured interview was confirmed, the researcher began preparation by recalling characteristics of the participant, reviewing the interview protocol questions, and securing all needed documents and resources.

**Recording and storing data.** The most prominent methods to record interview data were implemented: audio recording and taking interview notes (Merriam, 2009). These methods were also supplemented by reflective journaling and summarizing immediately following the interview sessions in order to capture not only actual content of the interviews, but also interpretations thereof.

**Field issues addressed.** The interviewing, transcribing, and recording process in case study research can be very intensive; therefore, recommended practices and safeguards were in place to ensure maintenance of data and equipment for quality data analysis (Creswell, 2013). These safeguards included advance preparation of multiple

recording devices, assigning pseudonyms to participants, memorizing key interview questions, bringing hard copies to the interview, securing a digital copy if needed. Post interview, the researcher immediately named the interviews into an mp3 file and secured the digital recordings of the master and backup copies in a total of three different computer file locations. The master copy was submitted to a third-party transcription company. Upon receipt of the transcription, the researcher completed the de-identification process by providing pseudonyms for participants, sites, and other proper names to maintain anonymity

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) acknowledges that data analysis is the “process of making sense out of the data” (p. 175). A highly preferred way to analyze the massive amount of data that was accumulated was to do so “simultaneously with data collection” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). After each series of interviews, the researcher sought emerging codes and possible themes and took notes if certain discoveries lead to the tuning of questions to be explored during the next semi-structured interviews. At the end of all data collection and periodic notetaking of findings, the researcher employed an iterative process, which included converging all evidence gathered (background data, historical documents, archival records, interview responses) to culminate with identification of themes that emerged, then reducing them to noted themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2013).

**Etic approach.** The initial phase of coding employed was an etic approach, the researcher’s perspective (Merriam, 2009) based on the established categories from Weitzel and Jonsson’s (1989) framework of the four stages of organizational decline and/or connections to studies from the literature review that address civilization,

organizational, team, and school decline, and leadership characteristics that contribute to decline. An iterative process of reading and reviewing the transcripts and written documents multiple times was applied to “provide essential participant information and contexts for analysis and interpretation” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 83). Analysis was based on the retrospective view of the phenomenon of school decline during the window of 2009 to 2014. The participants shared background of their personal and professional journey toward their arrival to Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS) and of their experience, roles and responsibilities which confirmed that they were viable participants for the study. Participants responded to the research questions and expounded on responses during the semi-structured interview. In the etic approach, the researcher determined patterns of responses among the participants as they related to school decline factors until codes and themes emerged as they related to the four stages of organizational decline.

**Emic approach.** The second phase of coding employed dissection of the interview from an emic approach, the insider’s perspective (Merriam, 2009) continuing to review the transcripts, searching for emerging themes that surfaced beyond the scope of Weitzel and Jonsson’s framework or studies on civilization, organization, team, and school decline based on participants’ specific words and phrases that may provide further insight and add to the body of research in educational leadership for this understudied topic. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose qualitative analysis software to codify categories from the etic and emic perspectives.

### **Trustworthiness**

This descriptive case study research must have trustworthiness or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as credibility. Credibility of the research required applying

strategies that ensured the most authentic responses from participants and well-defined interpretation of data collected. Those strategies included triangulation, member checking, and adequate engagement in data collection. Triangulation is making use of “multiple and different sources...to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251), cross-checking that data to shed light on a particular theme. The different sources of evidence used to converge evidence and corroborate findings (Yin, 2014) included background data, historical documents, archival records, and interview responses from the participants. Member checking, to promote accuracy, involved “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). This provided another opportunity for interview participants to trust the researcher and to review interview findings. Lastly, adequate engagement in data collection and management, to promote dependability, allowed the researcher to seek discrepancies, patterns, and allow repeated review of data such that they became “saturated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229).

## Chapter IV

### Findings

#### Overview of Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to determine the predictable stages of school decline as identified from the perspective of various campus leaders who were employed within the window of school improvement and decline, from 2009 to 2014 at Rise Comprehensive High School (RSHS) of Urban Independent School District (UISD). The interview participants included five campus level leaders who served within the window of the school improvement and decline time period. Efforts to secure an interview with a mid-management district leader as originally indicated in the methodology section was not realized due to the lack of response to the researcher's interview invitations. To maintain five interviewees, however, the researcher secured the following participants: two teachers, one assistant principal, and two former principals that served on the campus within the window of the school improvement and decline. Each participant met selection criteria. The interviewees responded to the following case study research questions:

1. In what way(s) was the organization *blind* to early stages of decline?
2. In what way(s) did the organization *recognize* the need for change but took no action?
3. In what way(s) did the organization take action, but the *action was inappropriate*?
4. In what ways did the organization reach a point of *crisis*?

Each question included a subset of one or more probes providing an opportunity for interviewees to respond to inquiries with more specificity (Appendix B). Also, the semi-structured interview format afforded the participants opportunities to further explain their responses or discover other issues surrounding predictable stages of school decline which surfaced.

Next steps included data collection and analysis. The data collected included digitally recorded, saved, transcribed, de-identified and secured interviews, documents gathered from state education agency records, district testing records and a campus improvement plan (CIP) from the UISD Office of Research and Accountability to retrieve testing records not accessible one year from the state education agency database, and interviewer notes. The researcher detailed the data analysis process and emphasized the use of both the etic and emic approaches to determine emerging codes and themes to research questions and findings in the literature review (emic) then emerging codes and themes from the participant interviews that add to a new body of knowledge in research on school decline. Lastly, the researcher described strategies employed to ensure credibility, accuracy, and dependability: triangulation of multiple sources of data, member checking, and adequate engagement in data collection.

### **Background on the Campus and Community**

Prior to an examination of the research questions, it is critical to describe the context surrounding the school, its community, and any other background information deemed pertinent to the research and researcher. As noted by Yin (2014), “a major strength of a case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (p. 119). This section highlights background information gathered on the

school and community based on observation, participant interview responses, local news reports, campus website information about Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS), state education agency reports on campus demographics and testing results, and archived, internal decision-making records to provide context and rich description of circumstances surrounding the studied phenomenon of school decline for RCHS.

**The campus.** RCHS, a campus which dates back to the late 1950s, was a school created for African American students and erected as a result of a benefactor and mechanical engineer who bequeathed funds to the new building. While much of the history is confined to yearbooks, the past few decades of RCHS, despite its origins, have been riddled with negative media depictions. The community school was associated with an ever-looming cloud of low achievement, violence and abject poverty, giving those within and outside of the community a less-than-favorable view of what the school has to offer.

**The community.** The campus has remained in the heart of a community, comprised of a variety of social ills as determined by the 2010 U.S. census data on that zip code area, participant recollections, and news articles: poverty, as seen in its housing developments, lack of healthy food options, pervasive access to illegal substances, reputation for high crime activity, and unattractive façade among the community encircling the school. The landscape of the campus zip code includes at least 20 churches, three competing, smaller charter high schools, one community center, 20 fast food restaurants, one grocery store, five liquor stores, four area banks, and 22 hair salons or beauty supply stores. The school is also surrounded by an aging home-owner community and nine apartment buildings with a reputation for high crime that display

very sparse upkeep. Despite these characteristics, community members, many of the baby-boomer generation, and its organizations remained connected to the historic campus, including, but not limited to, religious organizations, and the alumni organizations hoped for a revival of pride in both the community and school.

One may question the relevance of the abovementioned history of the RCHS campus and community to the study of school decline. As the research by Harris, Leithwood, and Strauss (2010) on turnaround school leadership suggests, there is a pressure on historically underperforming campuses to make “dramatic change” (p. 5) rather than focus on improvement over time. The external factors such as socioeconomic backgrounds, underserved environments, and lacking resources can create an extra challenge to the campus; but they do not automatically predict that the school will fail or exist in perpetual decline. Stigmas on schools and communities such as RCHS can be difficult to overcome, but researchers should not disregard the possibility that practices exist which have lead the campus in the direction of improvement. The community background provides context. It does not relegate the campus to being defined by its label, because it is possible to discover effective leadership and instructional practices (Harris et al., 2010), even in an underperforming school, should the researcher look deeply enough.

### **Student Demographics and Achievement**

In five years, campus enrollment dropped from over 1,017 students in 2009-10 school year to only 626 by the year 2013-14. The population majority has always been African American, and the percentage of Hispanic students grew from 8% to 10.2% within the case study window. On average, three out of four students were categorized as



economically disadvantaged. Noticeable outliers for the campus data were the high percentage of students receiving special education services and state funding support, the mobility, and the graduation rates. Within the five-year span, an average of 22% of the campus population included students requiring special education services. To what degree, state reports did not reveal. While the Hispanic population grew, the limited English proficient/English language learner (LEP/ELL) population remained relatively steady, with the exception of 2010-11 school year. The mobility rate for the campus was higher than the population of students with special services, ranging from 26.5% to as high as 36% in 2011-12 (Table 3). Perhaps the mobility issue existed due to the numerous apartment complexes surrounding the high school. Unfortunately, without the help of data archivists and historians on the campus, the researcher cannot determine if any of the special populations overlapped. For example, one could not determine from state reports if a SPED student was also highly mobile and perhaps a LEP student.

**Graduation rates.** Graduation rates spiked from 70.8% to 80.2% between 2009-10 and 2010-11; however, just as quickly as the graduation rate increased, it declined in the third year of this window, only reaching its next highest rate of 75.5 in 2012-13 school year. Also, the ratio of Recommended and Distinguished Achievement Program degrees to Minimum degrees earned by the students seemed to mirror the ratio of the regular to SPED population in only two years. The Recommended and Distinguished Achievement Program degrees<sup>1</sup> were earned by those who completed four years of math,

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<sup>1</sup> Students at UISD could graduate from high school under the following graduation plans which include completion of predetermined elective credits and the following core classes: Minimum (less than 4 years of math, English, and science), Recommended (4 English, math, science, and social studies, including higher level math and science), or Distinguished (4 English, math, science, and social studies, a minimum of 3 consecutive years of a foreign language, and other possible distinctions such as high performance on AP exams)

science, social studies, and science, including some advanced coursework, numerous electives, and met all state exam requirements. Students graduating under the Recommended Plan or higher were considered as having taken coursework that prepared them adequately for college. The Minimum Plan degree, however, was awarded to students who did not meet one or more of the requirements. For three years, the percentage of students earning the Minimum Plan degree was higher than the percentage of SPED students who tend to earn this degree more often. These data suggest that too many students from the regular education population failed to graduate with high school diplomas that prepare them for postsecondary success. Regular education students were graduating with the lowest graduation degree plan, ensuring their exit from high school, but not their preparation for success at the university, community college, or technical school levels (Table 3).

**Attendance.** Lastly, the attendance rate remained below 91.5% each year of the window, lower than most high schools in the district (Table 3), costing the campus thousands of dollars in funding which could have been used to fund needed personnel and other resources. Funding was and is still awarded based on the district and campus average daily attendance rate. A campus that suffers from underperformance has a compounded problem if on average ten percent of the student population attends irregularly. These data suggest a campus with demographics that pose a challenge if the needs for highly targeted resources and interventions are not met.

Table 3

*RCCHS Campus Enrollment and Graduation Data, 2009-10 to 2013-14*

Year	Total	African American	Hispanic	SPED	Econ Disadv	LEP/ ELL	At-Risk	Mobility	Attendance Rate	Graduation	Grad Rate	Recomm/ DAP plan	Minimum Plan
2009-10	1017	91.3%	8.0%	23.3%	76.5%	1.7%	79.6%	26.5%	89.1%	214	70.8%	78.0%	22.0%
2010-11	932	90.8%	8.4%	22.7%	71.8%	2.3%	82.4%	31.0%	86.5%	240	80.2%	73.0%	26.3%
2011-12	794	88.4%	10.5%	22.4%	76.7%	1.9%	82.7%	36.0%	87.4%	171	70.5%	77.2%	22.8%
2012-13	717	89.3%	9.6%	23.7%	76.6%	1.8%	69.3%	33.6%	87.9%	164	75.5%	73.2%	26.8%
2013-14	626	88.3%	10.2%	20.0%	79.2%	1.4%	77.8%	32.3%	85.1%	106	65.1%	66.0%	34.0%

Source: State Education Agency, Campus Performance Reports, 2009-2014

### Staff Demographics

During the 2000s, the principals and much of the administrative leadership have participated in a revolving door at RCCHS. Over the five-year time span of the study, RCCHS had three principals, one from 2009-2011, another from 2011-2013, then the third who only served for the 2013-14 school year. The population of novice teachers has been almost as high, if not higher, than the population of experienced educators three of the five years (Table 4). If a resident doctor is not allowed to operate on a complex surgery over a veteran surgeon with a record of successful surgery outcomes, one may ask how a novice teacher is allowed to teach in a high-needs urban school which necessitates a professional who possesses a high level of expertise and a track record of positive results.

Table 4

*RCHS Staff Years of Experience, 2009 – 10 to 2013 – 14*

Year	0 years	1 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 20	over 20	0-5	11 and over
2009-10	9.3%	37.3%	19.1%	20.2%	14.0%	46.6%	34.2%
2010-11	8.3%	30.8%	22.8%	21.7%	16.4%	39.1%	38.1%
2011-12	7.5%	20.5%	24.7%	30.9%	16.4%	28.0%	47.3%
2012-13	4.5%	29.3%	29.3%	25.6%	11.3%	33.8%	36.9%
2013-14	4.9%	26.8%	19.5%	39.0%	9.8%	31.7%	48.8%

Source: State Education Agency, Campus Performance Reports, 2009-2014

Research suggests that for a campus to make a turnover in achievement, campus leadership needs on at least three years to effect and sustain positive change (Meyers & Murphy, 2007), so a community school that cannot manage to hold onto an effective principal long enough to realize and sustain improvement risks a cycle of failure or regression.

Two different types of state exams were administered during this case study window based upon state education agency accountability reports. The transition in state assessments was a controversial one in 2011-12 according to articles from a popular nonpartisan parent website, state and local news reports and interactions with participants. The old test, which was phasing out, required students to complete exit exams in math, English, social studies and science, with curriculum ranging from material learned from ninth to 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The new assessment initially mandated students to complete 15 exams: algebra I, II, geometry, English I/II/III reading and writing, world geography, world history, U.S. history, biology, chemistry, physics. The

barrage of political and community backlash from over-testing caused the state to rethink which tests would be required for high school graduation. The state education agency ultimately, the next school year, changed the testing requirements for graduation from fifteen to five end-of-course exams: Algebra I, Biology, English I, English II, U.S. History, and the other end-of-course exams were no longer used, except for English III and Algebra II, which were optional for campuses that wanted to use English III and Algebra II as tests to measure college readiness. Urban ISD opted not to use English III and Algebra II exams.

### **The Participants**

All participants of the study met the criteria previously discussed. Each was a certified teacher with three or more years of experience, assumed at least one leadership role in their career on the campus, and the researcher secured at least one male and one female to determine if emergent themes will be established regardless of gender. Due to the lack of response by former and current district mid-management, a campus leader at the central office level was not secured. However, two principals during the window of this case study enthusiastically agreed to participate. In total, two former teachers of Rise Comprehensive, one former assistant principal, and two former principals were secured for semi-structured interviews. The name of each participant was de-identified to maintain confidentiality. In the first segment of each interview, participants shared background on their journey to RCHS and their current status in education.

#### **The teachers.**

***Kathy.*** Kathy, an African American female educator, is currently a high school English teacher at a high performing campus in the same district. She holds 12 years of

experience, certified to teach journalism and English. Kathy earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees from a historically black college/university (HBCU) not far from RCHS. She was employed at RCHS from 2009 to 2013. Her leadership included serving on the shared decision-making committee (SDMC) as a teacher representative for at least three years to her recollection. She was an active participant in an early intervention program developed by the 2009 principal. She sponsored the National Honor Society and proudly shared how she helped bring recognition to the campus as "the only and first school in the city to receive [the Global Service Award] from the National Honor Society Organization." Kathy's passion about service extends to her commitment to support the "underserved" and invisible students on the Rise campus.

*Simon.* Simon, an African American male educator and administrator, certified in secondary mathematics and principalship, is currently employed as an assistant principal at one of the largest comprehensive high schools within the same school district as Rise. Simon has spent 19 of his 23 years in education serving in Title I schools, committed to working with students some claim to lack the capacity to meet achievement standards. In recent years, Simon earned his doctoral degree in education. He was recruited to join RCHS as an Algebra I teacher in 2012 and remained there until 2014 when he transitioned into administrative leadership at his current campus. This participant has roots in the RCHS community and taught mathematics in nearby middle schools before arriving at Rise. He clarified, "I chose to go to Rise Comprehensive. I chose to go to Rise Comprehensive, not because I didn't have another place to go. I'm one of those teachers who is efficient professional educator who has a history of being able to bring schools from low performance into sustainability." His leadership was formal and

informal on the campus. He was brought in to be the math department chair, and he was a respected recruit by the 2011 arriving principal.

### **The assistant principal.**

*Moses.* Moses, an African American male, certified in secondary history and principalship and recently retired from the district from his assistant principal position, arrived at RCHS in 2007 and was transferred in spring of 2012. In his tenure as an AP, Moses shared that he worked under 9 principals within 11 years. Moses was just a few days into retirement from UISD at the time of his interview. Very early in his career at RCHS, even before the case study window, Moses noted being relegated to lead in areas such as discipline and attendance rather than instruction. He recalled being told by a principal upon his arrival to RCHS, “We didn’t bring you here for that,” referring to instructional matters. “We brought you here for discipline.” He lamented not feeling valued by some principals to contribute to instructional leadership.

### **The principals.**

*Tiffany.* Tiffany was the first African American female to serve as principal of RCHS in 2009, and her arrival to and departure from Rise were a relatively swift journey. In our interview, Tiffany disclosed that her background included success as a turnaround principal in an urban high school in South Chicago from 2006 to 2009. In 2009, the district initiated a principalship training program, and she was accepted in July. Not soon after, she was encouraged to interview for Rise and was quickly offered the position. Within a few weeks, she was charged to prepare immediately for the start of school and a bevy of new teachers.

Her experience dates back 13 years prior to her entry into RCHS with prior experience as a special education teacher and middle school and high school administrator. When asked to reflect on her journey in urban educational leadership and her drivers, she shared her focus and decision-making were always based on the needs of the children, the need to support the adults who serve them, and the need to “keep...on the horse,” despite the fact that you will have entities trying to “buck” you when trying to do what you believe is best for children. Her analogy connotes that the work of an urban educator is certain to be a bumpy ride. Tiffany served as principal at RCHS from August 2009 to spring 2011. Tiffany is currently a superintendent in an urban district in the northeast area of the United States.

**John.** John, a white male educator and administrator, with over 20 years of experience in education at the time of the interview, shared the story of his arrival to Rise which had some undeniable parallels to that of Principal Tiffany. In late June 2011, John was vacationing with his family, preparing to sign on as a principal in a district far south of Rise. He received a call from the district to interview for the principal position at RCHS. He was told the state education agency shared his name because of his success with three campuses over a 10-year period, all of which experienced issues with low student achievement.

He was “intrigued” by the offer, but was skeptical that he, a white man, would be used to pad the list of principal applicants to this historically Black high school. Once reassured of the legitimate offer to apply, John interviewed, and before he left town, he was offered the position. He started that next Monday, just a few weeks before teachers were to return. John was certified to teach in special education and physical education



and was experienced with coaching sports teams. He regarded himself as a leadership coach. He espoused the belief that you “take young people, you train them in the right way, ...mix those with some experienced teachers who can lead, [and] give them power, ... give them authority, ... give them voice,” essentially build a great team, and they will ensure the work is done. Principal John’s tenure at RCHS was also two years, like that of Principal Tiffany; he served from summer 2011 to spring of 2013.

Both principals had abrupt entries into and exits from Rise. Specifics surrounding those departures were not shared. Duke (2008) based on his research and experience with studying decline, recognizes the sense of vulnerability leaders must feel when openly reflecting on decisions and issues associated with declining achievement at their school. As a result, it is conceivable that some factors of decline may potentially be lost or undiscovered.

### **Value-Added Characteristics of Each Participant**

Each interviewed participant possessed a unique set of skills and experiences, making the discovery of patterns in their responses emerging themes even more noteworthy. Teachers, Kathy and Simon, were both stars in their own way under the leadership of the principal that hired them. Kathy was esteemed for her ability to bring positive marketing to the campus and for her strategic support of the English department as an elective teacher who focused on informational text reading and writing. Simon was a sought-after math teacher with cultural capital and a track record of success at a nearby middle school with students of the same demographic background as RCHS. Though both had strengths in the area of content knowledge and pedagogy, Kanter (2004)

describes the impact of stardom and the tendency of teams in decline to focus on the stars above the team as a whole.

Based on the initial interview and the depth and years of experience of the administrators, AP Moses, and Principals Tiffany and John, and the previous success rates of the principals, one would gather that the leaders possessed the key characteristics of leaders considered vital to ensure school improvement and turnaround: communication of clear leadership direction, focus on learning, creation of optimal learning environments for students, and cultivation of external relationships and support (Chenoweth, 2009; Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2013; Parrett & Budge, 2009; Robinson & Buntrock, 2011). The findings would come to reveal which characteristics could be considered lacking that may have contributed to school decline.

### **Accountability Data**

**Testing history.** Four sets of documents were collected and used to provide the researcher more background context for RCHS: (a) state accountability performance reports within the case study window, (b) district-provided performance reports on the campus test results from the new 2012 state exams, since the state did not report them that year, (c) a self-created tracking data chart from Principal John, highlighting the campus scores under his leadership, and (d) a campus improvement plan document. Descriptive statistics from state accountability testing data were gathered and merged in a table format to analyze measures of frequency and central tendency and determine any anomalous patterns. The campus improvement plan documents explained needs assessment analyses by the campus improvement plan team and strategies proposed to address areas of improvement.

Also, important to note, prior to the installation of the 2009 Principal Tiffany, RCHS earned low performance status over multiple years. There were warnings from the state of reconstitution and/or altogether school closure. The achievement data within the window of this study detailed some indicators of success in each year, but by 2013-14 and subsequent years, the statistics revealed an underperforming campus by state standards in multiple areas, scores which suggested dire educational, economic, and sociological implications for the community, despite marginal improvements (Table 5).

Table 5

*State Accountability Data 2008-09 to 2013-14 school year, RCHS*

	Year	Accountability Rating				
Accountability Rating	2008-09	Academically Unacceptable -AYP missed: Graduation Rate				
	2009-10	Academically Acceptable-AYP missed: Reading Participation, Math (perf & part), Graduation Rate				
	2010-11	Academically Unacceptable - AYP met				
	2011-12	No State Accountability- AYP missed: Reading				
	2012-13	Improvement Required-Index 1,2,3				
	2013-14	Improvement Required-Index 1,3,4				
		Campus	African American	Hispanic	SPED	Econ Disadv
<b>9th grade</b>		<b>Passing Rates</b>				
Reading	2008-09	74%	74%	75%	45%	73%
	2009-10	85%	87%	71%	43%	85%
	2010-11	69%	69%	64%	58%	68%
Mathematics	2008-09	33%	32%	45%	19%	29%
	2009-10	39%	38%	50%	6%	40%

	2010-11	46%	44%	57%	50%	46%
<b>10th grade</b>						
English Lang Arts	2008-09	84%	85%	75%	*	83%
	2009-10	75%	75%	80%	38%	74%
	2010-11	88%	88%	94%	76%	88%
	2011-12	80%	79%	88%	68%	77%
Mathematics	2008-09	50%	50%	67%	13%	49%
	2009-10	36%	34%	53%	20%	34%
	2010-11	51%	50%	60%	62%	50%
	2011-12	61%	59%	73%	38%	62%
Science	2008-09	32%	32%	40%	<1%	26%
	2009-10	33%	33%	40%	24%	31%
	2010-11	42%	41%	53%	32%	43%
	2011-12	57%	54%	73%	40%	53%
Social Studies	2008-09	84%	83%	83%	56%	82%
	2009-10	75%	73%	93%	59%	75%
	2010-11	78%	77%	81%	54%	78%
	2011-12	89%	87%	99%	63%	91%
<b>11th grade</b>						
English Lang Arts	2008-09	90%	88%	>99%	46%	89%
	2009-10	92%	92%	83%	40%	92%
	2010-11	89%	89%	88%	73%	89%
	2011-12	81%	81%	80%	45%	79%
	2012-13	79%	78%	100%	52%	79%

Mathematics	2008-09	70%	69%	79%	57%	71%
	2009-10	85%	85%	83%	67%	85%
	2010-11	74%	74%	71%	50%	71%
	2011-12	77%	77%	80%	35%	79%
	2012-13	55%	56%	71%	24%	51%
Science	2008-09	74%	73%	93%	38%	75%
	2009-10	90%	90%	83%	50%	94%
	2010-11	72%	72%	64%	42%	69%
	2011-12	83%	83%	>99%	29%	84%
	2012-13	72%	72%	*	52%	70%
Social Studies	2008-09	99%	99%	>99%	>99	99%
	2009-10	99%	99%	>99%	83%	99%
	2010-11	92%	91%	93%	65%	90%
	2011-12	95%	95%	>99%	74%	96%
	2012-13	92%	93%	86%	57%	90%

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*Note.* State Education Agency, Campus Performance Reports, 2009-2014.

Between 2009 and 2014, RCHS received an accountability rating of Academically Acceptable (AA) only one year. RCHS was rated Academically Unacceptable (AU) for 2010-11 but made average yearly progress. Then the campus received the new Improvement Required (IR) rating for 12-13 and 13-14. There was no rating assigned to any public high school campus under the watch of the state education agency in 2011-12 because of the first administration of the new state assessments. Despite the lack of a rating, 2011 entering ninth grade students were held to the minimum

standard on the state exam that year (Level I: Unsatisfactory or higher) to meet graduation requirements. According to the RCHS 2011-12 Continuous School Improvement Plan submitted to the district's Office of Research and Accountability, RCHS was identified as a campus in "Stage 5 [of school improvement] for not meeting annual yearly progress in math and science" (p. 1). As a result of identifying deficit performance in math and science, the leadership focused primarily on math and science, not necessarily maintaining a school-wide focus simultaneously on achievement areas that also warranted ongoing attention: English language arts, graduation rates, and attendance.

The state education agency defines Stage 5 categorization as a Title I, Part A school that continually fails to make annual yearly progress after one year of implementation or development of restructuring action. Prior to Stage 5, the campus must also have failed to make annual yearly progress in one or more achievement indicators for at least six consecutive years. RCHS for decades had not risen to or above an acceptable level of achievement, yet it qualified as a school to research for stages of decline because the site met Duke's (2008) operational definition of school decline in addition to Hochbein's (2011) framework definition of "absolute, individual school decline" (p. 291), as noted in the *Site Selection* section from Chapter III Methodology.

Analysis of the descriptive statistics of testing results revealed multiple hills and valleys. As one measure increased, another decreased. The researcher identified certain elements of interest and alluded to the declines later during the interviews to gain clarity from the participants. Descriptive statistics alone cannot tell a sufficient story. The researcher depends on the narrative of key participants to gain insight into specific

phenomena, but looking at the numbers did help to jumpstart and further the research on school decline.

**English language arts and social studies.** Although the ninth grade English I/Reading test scores never reached above an 85% passing rate, the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade English scores remained at an acceptable level of passing, competitive even to some of the more esteemed comprehensive high schools in the district. As a result, the state did not, prior to the new assessment, consider the campus low performing in English language arts. Unfortunately, between 2012 and 2014, the English I/ Reading I scores never reached above 38%, and the Writing I (ninth grade) scores only soared as high as 26%. There were no recorded English II/Reading scores until 2012-13. The state then reported Reading II passing rates of 47% and 38% respectively. The campus suddenly was deemed low performing in a core area it had not been on the state's radar for required improvement (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 6

*State Accountability Data, 2011-12 to 2014-14, RCHS*

New Assessment		RCHS	AA	H	SE	ED	*Met Level I
				<u>Passing Rates</u>			
English I/	2011-12	34%	32%	53%	6%	36%	66%
Reading I	2012-13	38%	37%	42%	40%	39%	
	2013-14	33%	33%	31%	32%	34%	
ELA I/	2011-12	15%	16%	12%	0%	18%	85%
Writing I	2012-13	26%	22%	52%	21%	26%	
ELA II/	2012-13	47%	45%	58%	46%	49%	
Reading II	2013-14	38%	36%	49%	37%	35%	
ELA/ Writing II	2012-13	24%	22%	42%	48%	28%	
Algebra I	2011-12	34%	33%	45%	73%	70%	66%
	2012-13	41%	40%	52%	25%	41%	
	2013-14	51%	50%	59%	31%	51%	
Algebra II	2012-13	79%	73%	*	*	75%	
Biology	2011-12	67%	66%	86%	38%	52%	33%
	2012-13	43%	41%	58%	29%	41%	
	2013-14	54%	51%	76%	33%	52%	
Chemistry (10 tested)	2011-12	9%	9%	-	5%	8%	91%
	2012-13	42%	40%	70%	-	44%	
W. Geo	2011-12	49%	48%	57%	13%	54%	
	2012-13	40%	39%	48%	31%	37%	
W. Hist	2012-13	38%	38%	38%	33%	43%	
U.S. Hist	2012-13	88%	83%	-	88%	83%	
U.S. Hist	2013-14	79%	80%	78%	40%	78%	

*Note.* For 2012, the first year of administration for the new state exam, Level I: Satisfactory Performance qualified for meeting graduation requirements. State Education Agency, Campus Performance Reports, 2011-2014.



Regarding social studies, under the old state exam, only 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders were tested. The graduation accountability, however, was only attached to exit level scores. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade social studies scores ranged from 75% to 89%, but with the high stakes of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade social studies exam, and the passing rate for this exam remained in the 90s percentage range.

**Mathematics and science.** Under the first state exam in math, there were incremental increases from 2010 to 2011 in ninth grade scores, with a maximum passing rate of 46%; growth to 61% passing in 10<sup>th</sup> grade math, but RCHS experienced an 11-point drop in 10<sup>th</sup> grade math in 2011, the following year, reaching its highest passing rate of 77% in 2012. Under the new assessment, math end-of course exams were administered. As of spring 2012, ninth graders enrolled in Algebra I were administered the state exam. Only 34% met the Level II: Satisfactory Phase-In I passing standard the first year. Each year thereafter, RCHS Algebra I scores at the Level II: Satisfactory level increased. The increases in Algebra I could have contributed to the foundation for the Algebra II course. The Algebra II results in 2012-13 reported 79% passing.

**Hidden figures.** Under the new state assessment, the state considered Level II as the satisfactory passing score; however, starting the first year of its administration, the Level I unsatisfactory scale score was accepted for students to meet the requirement for high school graduation. Although the Level II scores were significantly low, improvements were evident; in that, 66% of the Algebra I students in spring 2012 met the graduation requirements. Other hidden successes were as follows for Level I passing rates: 66% English I Reading, 85% English I Writing, and 91% Chemistry. On almost all ninth -grade exams, the Hispanic population outperformed the African American

students. The Level I results did not determine that students demonstrated mastery but that they were approaching mastery to some degree (Tables 5 and 6), and despite these improvements, RCHS was still deemed an IR campus and welcomed its third principal within four years. The waves of growth and decline indicated that some practices on the campus led to its improvement, while other actions or inactions contributed to a quick decline back to a low performing status.

### **The Campus Improvement Plans**

Only one Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) within the study window was secured from the district Office of Research and Accountability. The researcher solicited the documents from the current principal, three former principals, and former teachers. No electronic or hard copies were available or located by the principals. A central office researcher was only able to locate a partially complete CIP from 2011-12, from Principal John's first year on the campus. In case study research, Yin (2014) recognizes the value of archival documents that provide historical context and possible anecdotal data to benefit the body of research. Another data point recognized in the 2011-12 CIP was the Action Plan section. In the action plan, the campus was mandated to articulate SMART (Strategic-Measurable-Achievable-Realistic-Time Bound) goals. The primary focus of two of the three goals were centered around meeting a certain passing percentage on the older state test, in an effort to move the campus out of its Stage 5 status for its years of underperformance in mathematics and science. A total of three goals were submitted by the campus leadership:

1. Goal 1: Our goal is to increase ninth grade reading score to 87%, increase math scores to 83% meeting the standard for all groups, and increase the science scores 85% meeting standard for all groups.
2. Goal 2: Raise SPED students state assessment - accommodated/modified to 65% passing rate in all Core subject areas.
3. Goal 3: Attendance for 2011-12 average daily attendance will be at 91% (RCHS Campus Improvement Plan, 2011-12).

The nature of this document is to identify deficit areas or areas of need improvement; however, there is a section under each Goal called “Our Reality.” Here, instead of identifying what practices or strategies may have worked, along with areas of specific needed improvement, the document was submitted with only this line in each: “RCHS is officially in Stage 5 for not meeting AYP in Mathematics and Science.” Data on what worked or what could be further developed were hidden, invisible even, in this case, and seemed to suggest that there were no wins to celebrate or practices to build upon prior to the transition of leadership. Perhaps the lack of thorough archival documents over the span of five years exposes a much deeper issue that relates to organizational decline, stage one, where the organization is *blind*. One cannot assume that the CIPs were never completed; however, if the district cannot provide a copy for public record, one can only surmise how difficult it must have been for incoming principals to glean information from the outgoing leadership on campus data and possible strategies that worked.

### **Descriptive Summary**

The above archival documents revealed areas of concern that may have factored into the school’s declining achievement if they were not appropriately addressed by

leadership, faculty and staff of RCHS: attendance, socioeconomic challenges, declining enrollment, inexperienced staff, high leadership turnover, low performance history on standardized tests, mobility, school reputation, and a high SPED population. Stage 3 of Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) organizational decline framework determines decline is imminent when the organization and key participants therein recognize problems and fail to address them appropriately. The studies on civilization decline also warn against lack of response or ineffective, self-sabotaging actions on the part of the main decision-makers (Diamond, 2005; Duke, 2008; Greer, 2005; Tainter, 1988). The findings from this case study identified how the convergence of performance/achievement data and participant responses corroborated and/or refuted predictable stages of school decline.

The questions asked of each participant remained focused on the four stages of school decline. When the participants included any of the above issues in their response, the researcher allowed for the participants to elaborate, correct misunderstandings, or provide information that otherwise may not have been available through written documents. The results of the semi-structured interviews addressed drew connections between the background and statistical data to determine inconsistencies, trends, or anomalies to school decline.

### **Emerging Code and Themes**

**Stage 1 Blindness to the problem.** In response the first research focus questions: In what way(s) was the organization *blind* to early stages of decline, I asked the participants about internal and external blindness and discovered the following codes and emerging themes regarding what RCHS failed to see (Table 7):

Table 7

*Stage 1 RCHS Blindness to the Problem- Codes and Emerging Themes*

Codes	Themes
Graduation Rate Increases Unexplored Test Score Increases Unknown Strategies that Worked Unexplored	Intentional Blindness to Campus Successes
Alumni Association Disengaged PTO Lacked Understanding, Focusing on Non-Closure Community Partner Shut Out by Leadership	Strategic Partnerships Unrealized by Leadership
Teacher Unfamiliarity with Curriculum & Instruction Unawareness of School Push Factors	Internal Gaps in Knowledge about Campus Needs

*Intentional blindness to campus successes.* Studies on civilization decline (Diamond, 2005; Tainter, 1988) and organizational decline (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1988) recognize both the leader behaviors and impetus associated with intentional blindness, Stage 1 of the predictable stages of organizational decline. In declining civilizations, a possibility of blindness can surface due to an irrational behavior, called psychological denial (Diamond, 2005). In some cases, the imminent danger or problem may be too daunting to acknowledge, so the individual, the leader, is able to operate in a form of social dysfunction (Tainter, 1988) as a form of mental self-preservation. In organizations at risk of decline, self-centered leaders, characterized to possess “ethical [or] rational egoism” (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009, p. 365) are capable of denying the existence of a problem within the organization or even a crisis in order to maintain an image of a healthy organization.

The first patterns of blindness were recognized and articulated by non-principals, Kathy, Simon, and Principal John. Both Kathy and Simon worked at the campus during

the transition of one or more principals, and they ascertained consistencies within the organization that could explain what blind spots existed that contributed to the cycle of decline. In John's brief appointment at Rise, he noticed blind spots similar to those first identified by the teachers, namely programming that worked and unrecognized achievements. Principal John, however, did not recognize the same programming achievement as Kathy.

Kathy persisted in describing a program that was directly responsible for the increase in the graduation rate for two years that, in her opinion, on which the leadership put intentional blinders. She noted,

...being a teacher in the Accelerated Project Graduation Program, seeing the success, the change that needed to happen was that it needed to continue, and it did not. A blueprint, if you will, was provided to the new principal, this is how it worked, these were the results, here's the data of that academy; it works, let's continue to have it...but it did not happen.

Kathy frustratingly explained how this was a form of deliberate blindness, choosing not to see the success of certain programming. One year prior to the installation of Principal Tiffany, the graduation rate was 59.3%. The accountability data corroborates Kathy's recollection of the graduation rate increases for the first two years of the case study window and the subsequent drops.

Simon, who was responsible for the mathematics department and teaching the Algebra I course, clarified that, despite the accountability ratings published by the state for RCHS during his tenure of 2012-2014, the campus made marked improvements, particularly in mathematics, that went unrecognized.

To clarify, they [RCHS] were a required improvement school before I got there. There was an incremental growth my first year there. Leaving that campus, Rise had had the highest increase in test scores in the district. That's with school including middle schools that offered Algebra I.

It was clear that Simon wanted to detail, for the record, the successes of the campus that emerged from disappointing previous scores.

John also spoke passionately about the fact that Rise made some obvious strides in 2011-12 when he arrived "in math, science, English, social studies and so on." He went through the effort of showing me a document he created of the state exam scores from his two years at RCHS. "In 2011, this is how much we improved. 2012, this is what we did. Over a two-year period that was the percent growth that we saw." John was showing previous scores and noting strategies, including creative hiring, strategically placing his teacher leaders, working to change beliefs, not just instructional practices. The fact that a teacher like Kathy, stated unequivocally between 2011 and 2013 that testing "was a disaster," and that "the results of the test were low," is an indicator that some of the positive results or improvements during John's tenure went unrecognized or were unavailable at the campus level. The issue of John's blinders to the accelerated program connects to studies on organizational decline linked to risk-aversion managers who refuse to "be affected by the views, concerns, or evidence presented to them by those who advocate change within the organization" (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009, p. 365) His failure to see a solution to the graduation rate problem could also be linked to the leader's perception of the advocate who communicated the suggestion(s). Since Kathy was hired under Tiffany's leadership, it is a plausible speculation.

*Strategic partnerships unrealized by leadership.* A second level of blindness of Rice Comprehensive High School related to the following theme: Strategic Partnerships Unrealized by Leadership. An organization exists, thrives, survives, diminishes or dies based on internal and external forces of that organization. School decline literature acknowledges that inadequately responding to one's community can be detrimental to the campus (Duke, 2006, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012). All participants, with the exception of Principal John, detailed how the organization was unable to see how relationship building with those partners was critical to the growth and success of the organization, in this case, RCHS, and the leader's role in developing those relationships.

Kathy shared her disappointment with the invisibility of certain external groups and their inability to affect change on the campus:

Outside the campus, I was involved with alumni, so I was very familiar with Rise Comprehensive's Alumni Association. They were very active, wanted to be involved in helping however they could, but I don't think their voices were heard... It's not that the meetings contributed [to decline], but maybe the dynamic of what was happening or not happening between the school and the alumni association.

Here, the second principal, according to Kathy, did not see the importance of engaging the Alumni Association to help with advocacy and information sharing within the community. In addition, Simon felt that the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) was an external entity that was uninformed or ill-informed as to what its organization needed to do to support excellence on the part of RCHS.



...do they actually have influence, and are they exerting their influence in the areas that we need them to? They just want the school to stay open. ...As far as offering the right kind of support systems, what's the problem? ...Do you need us to get in contact with counsel people, not just in HISD, but in the city and in HISD school board members? How do we enact real change and reform? That's the level of education too, they don't know quite how it operates, they just didn't want the schools to close.

This testimony of Simon suggests that the PTO did not understand how to partner with its campus in a strategic and proactive way to meet Rise's real needs and the need existed for leadership to help provide that knowledge.

Moses provided an anecdotal account of the owner of a nearby fast-food restaurant in the neighborhood of the school. He detailed how his principal at the time, Principal Tiffany, instructed him to reach out to the community to determine what resources they could provide for the school, rather than develop the relationships herself. Moses asserted, "I did not feel the leaders had actually reached out to the community" referring to multiple principals. He arranged a meeting between a McDonald's owner and the principal to see the school, the children, and to discuss how her business could help with scholarships and even job-training and employment.

She came [to the school] and she met with the principal...I knew she wanted the principal to walk her around the school, so she could see, and the principal did not want to walk her around the school. [The principal] directed me to walk her around the school. That was okay with me. When we walked out the office ..., I began to walk her through the school. She said, "No, that's okay. I'm going to

go to my car.” I asked her if anything happened or if an emergency. She said, “No. If I’m going to donate and do all these things for the school, I simply, only asked for—because, see, I could write all these things off of my taxes. The only thing I’m asking for is a tour by the principal.”

That incident was an indelible memory of how his leader failed to see the value in nurturing that relationship with a community stakeholder. Moses understood the need for leadership to connect with its external constituencies. By inviting in potential business partners, the school could then help ensure that the community would positively market the school. AP Moses determined that “when business leaders in a community come in here, first of all, if our teachers are doing what they’re supposed to be doing, then when people in the community begin to say, ‘That school is terrible, they’re not doing anything,’ now, I’ve got people in the community to say, ‘That’s not true.’”

Principal Tiffany, in her own reflection, openly admitted, “I don’t think I was politically savvy or astute at that time in my career to understand that I needed to work with the outside forces to be able to do what I needed to do inside the building.” With so many internal concerns, she admittedly missed the opportunity to foster mutually beneficial relationships with entities outside of the campus.

In contrast, Principal John, recognized that the church held a very longstanding presence in the Black and Brown communities, and he used that knowledge for outreach by bringing in community ministers to the campus. “I was...out in the community meeting with the people in the [community], mainly the pastors in the area because I find that, you want to find out about a community, go to the churches.” He fostered relationships with the area pastors to support with safety and monitoring on the campus,

because unwelcomed adults were gaining entrance into the building. As a result, the campus, according to his recount, did not find itself on the news regularly for safety and security matters.

As noted in the Marzano et al. (2005) meta-analysis, outreach was the third most valued responsibility among leader responsibilities. RCHS is not an island. “The responsibility of outreach refers to the extent to which the leader is an advocate and a spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 58). These studies affirm the importance of the outreach factor and the fact that the principal must be both willing and able to communicate to internal and external stakeholders (Marzano et al., 2005). Principal Tiffany acknowledged her blindness in this area. Principal John applied outreach strategies to engage with the religious leaders of the community but missed opportunities to communicate effectively with other stakeholders such as the alumni association and/or PTO. His response did not indicate reflection on missed opportunities to engage with select stakeholders.

*Internal gaps in knowledge about campus needs.* Principal Tiffany and math teacher, Simon, who seemed to be most knowledgeable about curriculum matters related to state accountability of the five participants, stressed two other critical points of campus blindness: (1) how many on staff lacked knowledge of issues surrounding curriculum and instruction and (2) how there seemed to be a lack of awareness of the reason that RCHS lost hundreds of students from its community to other UISD schools. According to Simon,

you had quite a few teachers who were new. They don't know what our state testing system is all about; they just know what it's called. How will objectives

match with how it's tested? What resources are necessary? Some cling to a textbook. If they look at the textbook and its alignment to the examination, does it really do that thing? What are the areas that it doesn't do that? What resources do I now use?

On the administrative side, Principal Tiffany shared that inheriting a teaching staff of around 50% novice teachers, teachers with performance issues, and inexperienced graduates was a daunting task. She had teachers who were “not familiar with” or astute with “instructional delivery to urban students and ... students that were two to three grade levels below in reading and math.” Tiffany sighed as she explained the overwhelming sense of responsibility, having so many teachers seriously unaware of how to use high yield instructional practices and content knowledge to affect positive change in student achievement.

Simon, the noted math teacher, and Principal Tiffany, experienced turnaround leader, observed two areas within the predictable stage of blindness which parallel to situations associated with civilization, organization, and other school decline studies (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Tainter, 1988; Weitzel and Jonsson, 1989): the challenge of depleted resources and the possible inability to recognize how significant an impact the depletion can have on those most in need of the resource(s). In the case of RCHS, the depleted resource was experienced, effective teachers. Considering the national epidemic of teacher shortages, campuses, especially underperforming campuses, are pressured to fill the classrooms with adults who at least know the content. The campus leaders knew there were many novice teachers with their own level of curricular and instructional blindness; however, there seemed to be a form of blindness, also, as to

the best, most strategic plan to onboard and accelerate the skillset of this cadre of inexperienced educators.

Simon and Principal Tiffany also shared their concern for the imbalance in the number and academic acumen of the students from the Rise community who actually attended the school. They noted a blind spot on campus and among the community as to the actual reasons surrounding students attending other large, comprehensive schools. In his current role as assistant principal, Simon approximated that “more than 60% of our campus is from my side of town,” including the neighborhood of RCHS. He touts the main reason being the system, the expectations, and the leverage associated with being enrolled in a competitive advanced program. According to Principal Tiffany, the other schools offered advanced and specialty classes. RCHS offered

a basic curriculum. It had limited advanced placement courses, little-to-no dual enrollment courses. Pre-Calculus maybe had been one course; therefore, any student who really wanted to be prepared for college or any type of post-secondary...would not have received the education required for them to be successful. So, therefore the talent from the same community is now farmed out to over 26 different high schools within HISD.

The prevailing opinion from both is that the students were not so much running from RCHS as they were running towards opportunity. In all, teachers did not know what and how to teach, Rise did not have a fully realized plan of action to address the need, and the campus as a whole did not recognize the curricular/course offering factors that kept higher achieving students away.

**Stage 2 knowledge of problem, failure to act.** In the school design model, inadequate responses to certain conditions aligns with Stage 2 of the organizational model's predictable stage of organizational decline (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). The second segment of questioning aimed to discover in what way(s) the organization *recognized* the need for change but took no action. Of the different responses only one theme emerged from the following coded responses, a theme related to top management or the district (Table 8).

Table 8

*Stage 2 RCHS Failure to Act-Codes and Emerging Themes*

Codes	Theme
Administrative Feelings of Abandonment Uphill Battle for Resources	Unresponsiveness at the District Level

Each administrator vehemently expressed their discontent and frustration with the lack of district level support for Rise, despite the data which highlighted a number of issues constantly threatening campus improvement. The central office, as an extension of the local campus, is purposed to serve the needs of the campus. Principal Tiffany recalled her struggles with the district:

Well when you don't make the school a focus or a priority, the perception is the next person's reality. You did not have a lot of additional district fighting being pipelined into the school. The district did not come in and do a technology or instructional audit of the school and could blatantly see that this school actually had no resources to be able to be successful for children to even meet the minimum standards of the state exam.

Principal Tiffany recognized an internal, district level organizational factor contributing to the school's decline, the ineffectiveness of top management (Trahms et al., 2013), which by choice or design, failed to act to address the urgent needs of her campus and students. Principal John was also convinced that his campus was not on the priority list of support from the district, despite campus needs.

I know what the people in the community wanted, what they were looking for.

There was a huge gap in what the perception was and what they wanted. I found that the school district itself was pretty—How do I say this? They could've cared less about what it was, from what I could tell. The only thing they were interested in were getting the scores up. Nothing else mattered.

John also recognized that RCHS students still had not received their inventory of student laptops, an initiative already voted on and approved by the school board, yet “things weren't progressing the way that I knew that they were supposed to.” The district leadership communicated its expectation to increase scores; however, John posited that Rise was one of the black sheep of UISD, a blemish on the reputation of the district. Because of years of struggling to meet state standards on performance test, because of the negative reputation of the school and community, district level leadership, in John's opinion, failed to care for and even recognize the potential for academic success at RCHS. The district, according to Tiffany and John, failed to respond to the overall and urgent needs of the students and campus.

The assistant principal, Moses also shared his opinion of the district's involvement with the campus, related to his work on that campus from 2007-2012:

I always felt that the district never supported Rise Comprehensive High School, so we have to do something for ourselves...I always found it very interesting... you were leaving children behind, because if you know these kids may need additional resources, then I thought the district should have made every effort to make sure that those resources—Putting tools in place, after school things in place as well that will help them academically.

Those who were closer to the communication and hierarchical chain of command with the district level, the administrators, seemed more aware of and sensitive to the unresponsiveness of the district to make the necessary investments in its human, technological, and instructional resources to benefit students of the school.

Participants did not notice much inaction on the campus level, quite possibly because the campus for decades had been in a state of continual improvement, initiatives, subjected to state mandates, etc. in an effort to improve student outcomes (graduation, attendance, and standardized test scores). Despite the low performance at various points in the school's history, participants did not communicate the notion that those in the trenches of RCHS were doing nothing. Contrastively, as noted in declining civilizations, the elite (district leadership), through its inaction, ignores or overlooks the needs of a particular group because such an investment may be perceived as cost prohibitive (Diamond, 2005; Greer, 2011)

**Stage 3 knowledge of problem, inappropriate action.** In Stage 3 of Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) predictable stages of organizational decline, the organization recognizes that a problem exists; however, the entity takes inadequate and inappropriate action, leading the organization on a continued spiral toward decline (Duke, 2006, 2007, 2008;



Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008) Some of the most in-depth responses and findings were discovered while interviewing participants about research question three: In what way(s) did the organization take action, but the *action was inappropriate*? From the perspectives of the participants, there were quite a few frustrating missteps, by both intention and situational default. The codes and themes that emerged are on Table 9.

Table 9

*Stage 3 RCHS Inappropriate Action-Codes and Emerging Themes*

Codes	Themes
Discontinued Practices that Worked Persistence with Ineffective Practices	Implementation Challenges
Questionable Appointments Internal Leadership Power Struggles	Personnel Challenges
Poor Candidate Pipeline Hindered/Delayed Distribution of Resources	Central Office Obstruction

***Implementation Challenges.***

*Discontinued practices that worked.* RCHS experienced multiple layers of low performance. The participants, however, noted merit-worthy practices, that did not continue. As a result, the achievement data presented a picture of decline that soon followed. The merit-worthy practices addressed needs with culture building, instructional monitoring, schoolwide data sharing, and increasing graduation rates. Kathy believed that Principal John's choice to discontinue the Accelerated Project Graduation Program to address overaged student enrollment and low graduation rates was unwise. She explained the program, its purpose, and its impact:

The accelerated program was put in place to accelerate their learning. After looking at their transcript, there was things that—they had prior knowledge to a lot of information or subject matters, so they were accelerated in order to graduate...A blueprint, if you will, was provided to the new principal, it works, let's continue to have it. ...The structure called for ...teachers to have a modified work schedule...There was talk about it, but it didn't happen. It was going to be called something like REACH that already existed somewhere else, but it did not happen

Not only was John blind to a program that resulted in impressive gains for the campus, as previously mentioned in Stage 1: Blindness to the Problem, but he also allowed the introduction of a similar program, one that did not yield the same or improved graduation rates in subsequent years following Principal Tiffany's leadership (Table 3). His allowing such action undermined the positive accelerated program work. Perhaps Principal John, in this instance, was operating much like a risk-aversion organizational leader. He admitted being a "creature of habit" as a turnaround principal, using the tools and strategies he knew to work best for his campus. That statement would suggest a condition in which the leader's "escalating commitment (Brockner, 1992; Kirby & Davis, 1998) to previously successful strategies" (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009, p. 366) blinded John to effective programming and hindered his ability to trust the reality in front of him.

Rise, during John's tenure, became the site for a virtual school campus. Kathy recounts, "It mimicked what I knew as the Accelerated Program. It was an online school...a separate school, but it was housed on Rise's campus." Kathy expressed disappointment at the fact something else was created outside of the campus, but on the

campus, to address a need that was already being address in-house. She could not recall the impact of this new change in programming to the students who went to the other school, but she did verbalize that the graduation rate drop on their campus was undeniable, and performance reports displayed the drop (Table 3).

Principal John and Simon lamented in general terms that following John's departure, the systems John established to begin work toward sustainability "lost momentum" under the new leadership. John maintained that the new principal "lacked the stamina" to invest the necessary personal and professional commitment to continuing to build leadership capacity on the campus. Simon wondered, "what potential we had" if the practices that were started continued." The momentum was halted, because the new leader was not equipped to continue positive work which both predecessors began.

Principal Tiffany noted her implementation of a modified schedule, particularly for ninth graders, which was altered upon her departure to a more traditional schedule. She noted, "we had to double block math...and reading, one for Tier 1 instruction and the next 90 minutes for support, just so we knew that the students were mastering the skills needed." Undifferentiated scheduling is a problematic early indicator of school decline (Duke, 2008; Hochbein 2011, 2012). During the school day is the only time the school can have some assurances that students are getting the support they need, so in a struggling school, it was necessary to schedule students in such a way that they are able to get the support they require. The extra blocking of time to continue as initiated by Tiffany.

Moses believed some of the culture building activities and practices with instructional monitoring and feedback ended but should have persisted. As he expressed,

“We had the DJ playing music and the food out there [in the patio] and everybody looking through the windows” Moses saw this new celebration during report card time to be an affirmation of students’ hard work and felt that a public celebration communicated a value that academic achievement was important. He was disappointed, however, that celebrations of student honor roll and other academic achievements were short-lived. He also reflected on how, in hindsight, he should have remained more focused on instruction himself.

When we had instructional walkthroughs, how that particular year, academically, we improved. We should have done a lot more of continuing of the monitoring and the walkthroughs, so you can address, and you can support those teachers, give them the feedback, help them grow if they were willing to grow.... Those were some of the things that I wish, in looking back in retrospect, I would have done better. We were just on survival mode from the first day.

He did see the anecdotal benefit of regular instructional walkthroughs to teacher performance in the classroom and increase in student motivation, but he could not determine why the changes occurred soon after the practice began. As a campus administrator, Moses had the power and the opportunity to stay the course and continue instructional rounds, despite what other assistant principals did. Unfortunately, he lacked the leadership and/or focus needed to effectively prioritize instruction. As he stated, “We were just on survival mode.”

Overall, the responses by all five participants on the theme of implementation challenges corresponds to Duke’s (2008) detailed identification of early indicators of school decline that are associated with inadequate and inappropriate responses to

challenges such as the daily schedule, undifferentiated assistance through creative programming for both teachers and students, ineffective staff development for teachers who requires more directive coaching, and lack of focus. Duke's (2008) list of early indicators was not an exhaustive one, yet it is not surprising that the gains and declines happened so swiftly considering how notably effective practices ceased.

Principal John proudly listed what he categorized as his best practice during his tenure, using creative recruitment strategies to hire quality teachers. Upon reflection, John speculated as follows:

The biggest thing that we did to turn that direction around was we hired better quality people and brought them in there and they were committed to staying with me. They weren't just in and out in a year. I was able to increase my pool of applicants simply by building a relationship with the other building principals because once they're fully staffed, they still have applicants that want to work there. They're good quality applicants, they just weren't able to hire them.

Simon, one of John's hired teachers, endorsed the need to find the right people and bring them onboard: "People, human resources, is what we really need and the appropriate human resources. ...the thing that really is intangible that we really need in schools, and schools like this, happen to be human resources and the connection between those people." Simon also shared how his cultural awareness and capital (Gay, 1988, 1995, 2000), not just content knowledge and pedagogical expertise, made him and other colleagues hired for the math department some of the most viable teachers for RCHS:

One teacher who has spent most of his career at Longhorn Middle, in Southern Pines which is very close in proximity to Rise Comprehensive. Well, another

teacher who was from Raleigh Lane...I'm from a Raleigh Lane...We had some neighborhood connections there, and we had a connection to the school at the time.

Although Duke (2008) noted hasty hiring as an early indicator of school decline, the researcher missed opportunities to further discuss an important facet of the hiring process, but Simon eloquently identified in his response, recruiting and retaining teachers who possess three critical characteristics: content knowledge, strong pedagogical skills, and the cultural capital to maximize instructional time.

John's hiring practice can be attributed to years of experience with building a team and networking with fellow principals of highly sought-after campuses. I agree that the practice attracted talented teachers, yet there is still a danger of short-term commitment to a campus that joins the team because of an individual or leader of a campus over a more substantive objective. Unfortunately, many of the teachers he hired left soon after his departure, leaving Rise in danger of another cycle toward decline. If only each incoming principal were astute at this practice, then the likelihood of sustained improvement would increase. John, a former coach, enlisted familiar skills to create what sports-related research calls cohesion (Carron et al., 1998; Carron & Eys, 2012; Festinger et al., 1963; Gross & Martin, 1952; Kanter, 2004), a structure that develops the team's tendency to work together in collective pursuit of a common purpose. John clearly wanted to create a winning team, where his identified stars, like Simon, were expected to contribute to the team and build capacity for high achievement.

Turnaround campuses are constantly under district and state scrutiny, and even threat of closure (Duke, 2006, 2008; Hochbein, 2012). Leadership, as with civilizations,

organizations and teams (Brookover & Lezotte 1979; Diamond, 2005; Kanter, 2005) when not laser-like-focused, can easily get distracted by putting out daily fires or jumping to the next initiative, instead of staying the course with strategies or programming that work and have proven positive results. Also, the newly appointed principal can feel the need to dismiss previous practices, assuming that if anything worked before, that principal would still be in place. The abovementioned circumstances surrounding ending practices that work could be associated with a lack of thorough program evaluation, short-sightedness on the part of leadership and/or an absence of a detailed written plan to ensure replication as recognized by four years of missing campus improvement documents.

*Persistence with ineffective practices.* It can be just as detrimental for an organization to persist in practices that are counterproductive as it is to abandon implementation of those that work, as noted in studies of civilizations such as Sumerians and Mayan society (Good & Reuveny, 2009; Tainter, 1988). These societies abandoned practices that would sustain their nation, and instead opted for practices that caused each civilization to operate in opposition to its own long-term interest. Such is the case when a campus abandons effective practices for those that the data determine do not work.

Moses's account of his charge to address the attendance and dropout problem on the campus exemplifies the above findings. Assistant Principal Moses recalled his explanation of the problems and how he proposed improving attendance.

I created...a school attendance team. ...After they missed three days, they would come in and they would meet with these individuals (personnel given extra duties). We would see what was going on. By the time they met, ...they had

absences five times.... I initiated what we called the Rise Intervention Team Helps. On that team, I had the Student Attendance Team (SAT). Our job was to put support beams, whatever their problem may be.... I believe that was a good start.

Moses was proud of his creation of the teams, partnership with the city's Urban League and the help provided to students and families with wraparound services for parents to keep the student in school. Unfortunately, although he was enthusiastic about his leadership over attendance, his explanation of the strategic plan lacked details on implementation, structure, contingencies, and articulation of sustainability. To substantiate that Moses led attendance efforts, Moses's name was included on the 2011-12 Campus Improvement Plan to address attendance. Unfortunately, the data from Table 3 show that the efforts under Moses's leadership to address attendance were unsuccessful, contrary to his perception. RCHS's attendance rate decreased from 89.1% to 87.4% over a three-year period, costing the campus thousands of dollars in much needed funding for the subsequent school year. There was a clear divide between a leader's perception of improvement and the harsh reality of decline.

Duke (2008) clearly states the negative effects of inadequate monitoring of progress as another form of inadequate response to a school challenge. It is evident that Moses worked diligently on the attendance problem, based on his response; however, one must wonder if he checked daily, weekly, or even monthly attendance reports, generated by the district office. In the business of education, effort and good intentions, while necessary, do not suffice to move the achievement needle toward success for students.



Principal Tiffany, apparently more reflective about her implementation plans admits she was guided by an extreme “sense of urgency,” and tried to tackle too many of the campus’s ills too soon and all at once. When asked, “Where or how did the organization get it wrong?” She responded:

I would definitely say at the beginning of the school year, looking at the curriculum, the master schedule, and looking at student failures, all of the things that needed to be tackled, tackling too many areas too soon. And now that I sit back and reflect, I could have just focused on the master schedule.... But I put that as well as five or six other major changes in place at the same time, and that overwhelmed the staff.

Tiffany’s reluctance to abandon her overextended practices, while in the trenches of the work of school turnaround, admittedly created a level of burnout for teachers and staff. In an overenthusiastic effort to get some wins for the campus, leaders can be plagued by tunnel vision if they are not cautious. Greer (2005, 2011) and Klein (2015), whose studies expanded upon Tainter’s (1988) work on civilizations in decline, acknowledge that when faced with challenge or threatening decline, those in power have been known to continue in the course toward decline, collapse, even when it is clear that the desired outcomes are not reached. Tiffany’s choice regrettably caused Rise’s human resources to become depleted, thereby stunting some desired growth outcomes.

Numerous teachers’ grading practices was another contributor to declining graduation rates. Massive failures kept students from earning credits. The trickle-down impact led to slow adjustments to curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, multiple failures, grade level retention, and underperformance on graduation rates.

Tiffany also recognized that teachers who happened to be alumni were some of the very ones leading poor practices. She recalled:

They were saying, “[Students] are not ready, why is she pushing them to graduate; they need to take my class over.” And 70 was passing, but they got a 69 and would make them stay for another year. It was utterly... it was heart-wrenching. It was just that bad... nobody wanted to see success, and they would sabotage it. Out of 75% of the staff.

Tiffany’s anecdote felt overwhelmed and sad at the magnitude of the internal practice of failing students that had become the norm. To overcome such a battle required drastic changes among the teaching staff. Tiffany opted to “coach them up” rather than risk a campus full of substitute teachers. John, however, the second year of his appointment responded to the challenge differently by “getting rid of 23 teachers by the end of the first year.” He did not fire them. He “coached them out.” In this case, faced with the daunting task of ensuring the right teachers were on staff, Tiffany’s approach mirrored that of a risk-aversion leader (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009), more so, hesitant to make such a monumental shift and potentially suffer the “environmental jolts” that would ensue (Trahms et al., 2013, p. 1289) , especially once the school year had begun. John, on the other hand, operated much like a turnaround principal, highly aware of the time sensitivity factor and pressure to make significant improvements in performance areas measured by the state (Harris et al., 2010).

***Personnel challenges.*** Leaders and the people who work with them matter. It is important that the leader possess four overarching characteristics to inspire their staff and positively impact the campus over time: communicator of a clear leadership direction,

focused on learning, creator of optimal learning environments, and cultivator of external relationships and supports (Chenoweth, 2009; Knapp et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2013; Parrett & Budge, 2009; Robinson & Buntrock, 2011). Despite the necessary commitment, a campus and its leadership must have to focus on learning and optimizing the learning environment, personnel issues and challenges were mentioned by all participants as missteps within the organization that contributed to school decline. Internal conflicts among leadership were mentioned by Tiffany and Moses. Kathy and Simon determined that some people were wrongly assigned or appointed to duties that did not best serve the organization. And John, Tiffany, and Moses referenced their battles to disturb and disrupt the status quo that threatened student academic achievement and a positive school culture.

*Questionable appointments.* Not all participants agreed on the individual(s) whose position was detrimental to the campus, but almost every participant mentioned one or more individuals who, in their role, did not successfully work for the benefit of the organization and students. Graduation coaches, for example, were mentioned. These were individuals who supported students to successfully complete online coursework, through recovery of or first-time credit, namely to support their acceleration to on-time graduation. Kathy, the elective teacher, detailed how over a span of two years, there were four different graduation coaches, included herself as a substitute while there was a search for another grad coach.

All the graduation coaches, I truly believe, have a desire for students to grow and to graduate. The difference is in their out-of-the-box resiliency.... I believe, a good graduation coach, a great one, will have those characteristics. It's in the

relationship building. Meaning just knowing that all students can do it. They can with proper support from the adult on the campus.

The characteristics Kathy identified were “out-of-the-box resiliency,” accessibility outside of normal work hours, desire for student to grow and graduate, and relationship-builder. Kathy shared a personal story of a student who was told by a coach or administrator that she would not graduate that summer. She viewed desire alone for students to pass as insufficient to ensuring success. Rise hired a total of four coaches over a two-year period. The turnover, even in that role, was another example of campus staffing inconsistency that Simon described that made a negative impact on student achievement.

Simon, the math teacher and department chair, recognized other personnel issues, namely the appointment of the new principal after Principal John’s departure and new-to-Rise teachers who were “not a good fit” for RCHS. Simon wondered:

What could have happened with the school? The greatness that could have happened with teacher retention improving, with resources being used like they should have, with a consistent administration. The [new] administrator [who followed John] wasn’t even our first choice. Now we have a new person, so we’re starting over....

Simon, who was in training for an administrative position during his tenure at RCHS was able to see the personnel challenges through a different lens than his counterpart Kathy. He considered the personnel issue from a system perspective more so than as an individual one. For Simon, John’s efforts were admirable. He believed John was “doing a great job” with creating systems and hiring a starting cadre of trusted and effective

teachers to lead the achievement work before his unforeseen departure. Simon also understood that with a change in principals, there would be a potential restart to the work done the prior year. Simon's "follower perception" (Oyer, 2015, p. 692) of his then leader, John, positively correlated to his feeling of self-efficacy as a teacher, probably because he was allowed to work alongside John to plan and implement practices to benefit students. Simon's lack of confidence in the new principal, however, did not cause his resolve to waver while committed to the work at RCHS. As soon as an opportunity arose for him to lead at another campus, however, Simon took advantage of it.

Another personnel challenge involved Moses who was appointed to handle outreach for the campus, but Principal Tiffany realized delegating that responsibility to someone other than herself who is the face of RCHS within the community she served was an errored decision. She recalled,

The reason I had problems was because I did not connect with the external forces which were the community members and the alumni. They really were the ones who controlled the narrative about what I was going to be successful at and what I wasn't going to be successful at, and I had to learn that lesson the hard way.

Two of the leadership pathologies noted by Kanter (2004) linked to organizational decline that Principal Tiffany alludes to in her memory are communication and respect. Word-of-mouth communication in this case was an underestimated tool. The school already had an upward battle and could not afford to have a reputation of being unwelcoming as well because the principal wrongly assigned duties to one of the leaders that she, in fact, should have fulfilled. There is a tacit message conveyed of disrespect to community stakeholders when the leader does not prioritize taking the time to engage

with those who are highly invested or who wish to be invested in the school. The fact that Principal Tiffany reflected on this oversight during her tenure at Rise also notes there was no real intention to relay a message of disrespect to said community.

Another appointment, that of the AVID teacher, garnered pushback from members of the faculty and was received with district skepticism. AVID is the acronym for Advancement Via Individual Determination, a nationally recognized program whose efforts attempt to help underachieving students prepare for college success. Assistant principal Moses believed the problem was a combination of the appointment and the lack of implementation planning. “He,” referring to Principal John, “wanted AVID, but it was more on the individual which he brought in. There was no real plan of action.” Principal John was adamant about the need to hire the right people, and the research on school decline and turnaround school leadership supports his position (Duke, 2008; Harris et al., 2010); however, certain participants did not believe the appointed AVID coordinator was the man for the job. Kathy also expressed her reservations:

Rise Comprehensive became an AVID school. ...AVID is a great program when utilized properly, when it is executed properly, meaning you have to have the right teachers in place. Rise Comprehensive got it wrong with making the AVID coordinator someone [whose] position was cut, but they were able to keep a job on the campus, so they made the AVID coordinator.

Kathy, again, seemed highly critical of Principal John and of his leadership decisions during his tenure at RCHS while lauding the practices of Principal Tiffany, a characteristic observed in declining teams (Kanter, 2004). For reasons not fully articulated in the literature, teams in decline are more likely to indulge in heavy criticism

of individuals, including the leader, in response to a problem. Kathy's follower perception of Principal John was the polar opposite of her perception of Principal Tiffany (Oyer, 2015). Kathy was hired by Tiffany, so it is possible that with the transition in leadership, Kathy found herself in some respect displaced from her former roles and responsibilities as a teacher leader.

Lastly, Principal John made a major change with the counseling department his second year. His rationale for changing the counselors' position was to have their title match their actual responsibilities and to ensure budgetarily the campus was doing well. John discovered the following:

The counselors at my campus at Rise Comprehensive were making more money than the assistant principals... [UISD] had a job listed among the approved positions of academic advisor which was basically a teacher salary plus I think \$5,000 as a stipend. At the end of my first year I told the counselors, "You all can stay, but your job description is going to change." I'm doing away with counselors. I hired communities and schools to bring in real counselors to do small group, large group, individual counselling, work on the environment at the school. Then my school counselors became academic advisors to work on PGPs (personal graduation plans), and get schedules, graduation plans....

The pushback from the counseling staff was great. According to John, the counselors felt unappreciated. They took pride in their title of counselor and were at risk of diminishing their pay should they remain at RCHS. From John's perspective, he was saving the counselors/academic advisors from being perpetually "dumped on," especially if UISD had added initiatives for the school to follow. From the counselors' point of view, John

did not value his team for their skills and commitment to RCHS (Carron et al., 1998; Eys & Kim, 2017; Kanter, 2004) His decision negatively impacted morale and led to the decision of most of the counseling staff to find employment elsewhere.

***Internal leadership power struggles.*** Conflict in schools, especially in turnaround campuses, is an inevitability. What determines the trajectory of the school, though, is the leader's response to the conflict. Is the leader's response fight or flight, aversion or collaboration (Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Harris et al., 2010; Trahms et al., 2013)? How quickly and effectively that leader responds to internal conflict can determine the likelihood that the campus is headed on a path to decline or success. John, the more seasoned turnaround principal, used a familiar strategy to address a familiar problem that tends to arise when one becomes the new leader of an established regime. When a power struggle ensues that is detrimental to the culture and focus on continuous improvement, the turnaround leader must engage in the "active and purposeful abandonment of ways of working that no longer meet the school's stage of development" (Harris et al., 2010, p. 225). John was willing and able to cut ties with individuals on the campus he believed could sabotage his vision and work.

Tiffany, in her inexperience, attempted to work with the status quo groups initially and change from within. The pressure was too much. She was a leader who lacked the historical knowledge and situational awareness (Marzano et al., 2005), and perhaps coaching support, to effectively combat the uphill battle of status quo entities, though she gave a valiant attempt during her tenure at RCHS (Diamond, 2005; Duke et al, 2008; Good & Reuveny, 2009; Greer, 2011). She shared:



Because when you are on the front line and you have to come into a culture that needs change, and you inherit two people that are a part of the fabric of the status quo, it is difficult for them to hold anybody accountable when they won't hold themselves. So, I had a lot of pushback; I had a lot of undermining. The new assistant principal, unfortunately, fell in line with the old guard....

In her turnaround work, the struggle was undeniable; in that, the principal had the challenge to turnaround the mindset and practices of the leadership team and reboot the entire school culture. The campus principal can establish a clear purpose but cannot singlehandedly fulfill that purpose without a strong leadership team. Overall, both principals detailed their experiences with these power battles, but John's approach was entirely different.

John was chosen to lead RCHS over an assistant principal who was already employed on the campus. Principal John made some swift changes among his leadership team to arrest any simmering issues and potential subversion. In his experience, John stated, "I manipulated the system a little bit." The fact was that the female assistant principal who applied for the principal's position did not get the position, and he did. "That's just not a dynamic that you put in the same room. No matter how hard she tries she's not going to forget that." By the end of his first year, he transferred another assistant principal, Moses. Because of John's decision to quickly redistribute administrators and negotiate moves with other principals, John did not struggle to assert his authority on the campus following their departure.

In contrast, Principal Tiffany, who also inherited principals and brought one of her own, found herself in constant conflict with the very people who were to support her

vision for the campus. She lamented that even the administrator she brought with her who was new in the position, wanted to support political decisions in favor of adults rather than insist on doing what they needed to for children. Principal Tiffany realized “as far as [she] was concerned, it was an uphill battle, working within [her] own administrative team and holding them accountable to what the expectations were and vision for the school.” Moses, the assistant principal, also noticed the mounting tensions among the leadership team, particularly with one administrator. In Moses’s view, “that’s when you really started seeing a division in campus leadership.” There was a battle between Principal Tiffany where she sought to establish her role as principal, and the new assistant principal [not Moses] was dividing the campus, as he (the new assistant principal) thought he should have been the principal. Moses who observed the ongoing internal conflict recalled, “When looking back in retrospect...she dealt with that too long. She should’ve requested that he be moved if he could not humble himself and/or do what’s in the best interest of the students not your ego. Focus had left.” Moses observed that the lack of focus on children overall due to this power struggle created a ripple effect among others on the staff. “Then, you started seeing where some that are females on campus, in these battles.” Principals John and Tiffany, and assistant principal Moses all seemed to know the risks to school improvement that can surface when personality conflicts and power struggles among the leadership exist. Fortunately, both leaders’ experienced successes during their tenure, though Tiffany seemed to have endured the battle much longer.

*Central office obstructions—an emic theme.* An obstruction is something that impedes passage or progress. Hochbein’s (2011, 2012) and Duke’s (2008, 2015)

research allude to conditions, specifically inadequate school system responses to challenges faced by the campus that can lead the school on a path to decline; however, the operational model of school decline (Duke, 2008) did not specify if the system was part of, but outside of the campus itself. In this subsection, an emic theme emerged that could add to the body of research on school decline. One of the most disconcerting findings that emerged from the interviews was the participants' accounts of the central office's efforts to impede progress of Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS) through a series of inequitable, status quo practices. The activities which participants described ranged from direct influence on campus hiring practices to hindering/delaying distribution of resources.

*Poor candidate pipeline.* Urban Independent School District (UISD) used a vetting process to ensure only qualified, certified teachers entered the pool of candidates for hire. The premise is that the process would improve the quality of applicants and that campus leaders would be able to choose from for their campus. Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) Stage 3 predictable stage of organizational decline was evident (Duke, 2006, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). In this stage, the organization knew the problem and acted inappropriately as the administrators and math teacher, Simon, vividly described their experience with the district as they attempted to secure quality teachers and leaders for RCHS campus.

Simon, Principals Tiffany and John, and assistant principal Moses voiced disappointment with the lack of support at the district level regarding hiring. Simon detailed the process he and other members of the selection committee endured when seeking a replacement for Principal John. The committee, which was led and facilitated

by central office leadership, was established to give the impression of openness and transparency. Simon's account determined actions to be opaque:

This administrator...wasn't even our first choice. We had a first round of interviews, I was on that committee, also, and we selected a person. While in the second round of interviews, there was only one. [laughs] It doesn't make sense. Do you understand where I'm going with this? ...him against us because it makes no difference about what we need or what we desire...It's just what you want to send us. We had to accept that. Now, we're starting over again.

Simon attempted to work with the new leadership, but he soon realized the campus was headed back into crisis mode because of the lack of consistent, effective practices with the campus programming and leadership. A residual emotional impact of faculty and staff feeling their voices are unheard and unacknowledged, is low morale and low motivation (Kanter, 2004). Simon's statements also suggest that the district did not agree with the panel's candidate decision, and thus manipulated the list of candidates. One might also question if the district was allowed to operate in this way because the campus did not have a leader on the campus already groomed to take the helm. For the work that each principal initiates to continue along the path toward school improvement, it is incumbent upon the leadership to ensure others on the team can move the work forward in case some sudden "jolts" or other challenges occur that could disrupt the course (Duke, 2007, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Short et al., 2007; Trahms et al., 2013, p. 1289).

Principal John felt the district's decision making for a successor was a huge misstep. John considered the new principal to be a good man; however, he knew he was not the right choice for the high needs campus, because

he didn't have the energy that Rise Comprehensive requires...If you're going to take a school in trouble, you better hire somebody that's going to be a high energy person and this guy had a lot of experience, but he was just—He had retired from North Carolina,... [the superintendent's] buddy.

Although John left abruptly, he admitted leaving Rise one of his biggest regrets. He still cared deeply for the campus and wanted it to thrive and the student opportunities to be equitable; however, after realizing who was chosen to be his successor, the former principal felt disillusioned without much confidence in the district level leadership.

Another hiring practice of central office involved how it funneled the teaching pool to RCHS. According to Assistant Principal Moses, “the district was pushing that you have somebody certified, so you're looking at the time and making sure somebody's there by the time you have students there on the first day, but really just getting people who were certified.” He vividly described a situation in which he felt those in central office human resources deliberately sabotaged their campus's ability to hire a quality candidate. He recounted:

We got this teacher who came from up north... the University of Dartmouth, and he was a science teacher. We immediately grabbed him, hired him. Let him know we're going to hire him. We received a phone call right after we sent the paper work and everything too. Great teacher, excited about being here and everything. Then we received a phone call the next day telling us that we cannot hire him. We went on and hired someone else. Just happened a few weeks because—Certain things you just can't let it go. I came back and checked that guy; he was working. They hired him at Vanderbilt HS.

Vanderbilt High School, a large, comprehensive high school had a population of around three thousand students, was a well-established campus in Urban Independent School District (UISD). Vanderbilt's principal also had a lot of clout in the district and the state administrative organizations. This incident was a defining moment for Moses. "This helped me say, in my mind, ...that they don't want us to do well...Now, I have to take this guy who got in trouble at his other school...but I have to hire him." Moses felt robbed of the opportunity to recruit and secure a good teacher on the Rise campus. He asked himself why it was acceptable at the district level to do this to RCHS, and why RCHS was forced to choose among the pool of candidates that already had documented problems from their previous campus or insufficient experience.

Principal Tiffany was clear and concise in her opinion of the central office hiring practices and their impact on RCHS. Her matter-of-fact tone was an indicator that she regularly dealt with these unfair hiring and campus assignment practices. Tiffany's comments echoed Moses's:

I was limited with the people that were brought to me to select from. It was a first-year teacher. It was always a teacher who had performance issues when they just needed to move to another campus. I always had to choose from Teach for America students, teachers, graduates, rather, that had no urban experience, except a summer prep program. So, my classrooms were actually staffed with teachers with less than two years of experience.

Tiffany, in her experience with turnaround and urban school settings, felt particularly challenged by the task of providing effective professional development to a team of teachers who knew much more about their content than they did about solid pedagogical

practices required to impact student achievement. She could not depend on the expertise of veteran educators, for many of them, despite their years of experience, required coaching and development, also.

Principal John researched a little further into the phenomenon of high percentages of underperforming teachers on staff at Rise to try and understand why this was an ongoing practice at this campus. He detected “that they [the district] stereotyped,” that human resources would typically funnel Black teachers, and low performing ones, in the direction of the school. He asserted,

I found that Rise Comprehensive had been, for a number of years, I guess for lack of a better word, a dumping ground. When the teachers at other schools like Roosevelt, Vanderbilt, Peabody, some of the better schools in the district, when teachers didn't cut it at those schools and they wanted to transfer them somewhere, there always seem to be an opening at Rise Comprehensive and that's where they land. The history was, traditionally, they had dumped poor teachers over there because they were going through administrative teams left and right every year, too so they got away with it.

John's voice projected as he further explained this system and belief system problem. John's philosophy was that being Black does not automatically qualify an individual to teach Black children, and having a different ethnicity or cultural background should not disqualify a teacher from consideration. Overall, the lack of transparency and teamwork from central office frustrated campus leadership. The participants communicated a sense of being left to fend for themselves amid some seemingly insurmountable odds, some of which were imposed by the very district and central office staff charged to serve their

campus needs. Principal John was so infuriated by this covert strategy, he recalled an impassioned confrontation with the UISD Chief of Staff in front of the superintendent:

You're the ones that sent unqualified people over here for up to 10 years. You dumped people over here because you didn't want to mess with them, and you took advantage of the fact that there was a constant rotation of opening and closing door of leadership people.

John was compelled, as he stated, to "call them out on" their systematic attempts to thwart success of his school. John's boldness reflects the level of frustration reached by a campus leader whose efficacy is challenged because the very people responsible for putting him in the position have to be convinced, cajoled, or exposed in order for the central office departments to serve the needs of his campus.

The takeaway from each of these accounts of the participants is that people and power matter. Adults can propel schools to great success or diminish the value of an institution altogether. People use their power to enhance or undermine and destroy, believing in either circumstance that they are acting in the best interest of themselves and/or the group they represent (Adams, 1981; Carmeli & Sheaffer, 2009; Diamond, 2005; Greer, 2005, 2011; Kirch, 2005; Yoffee & Cowgill, 1988). Just as the students at RCHS needed qualified staff and advocates at the campus level, the campus itself, despite its "credit score," its low performance profile, needed and deserved qualified people at the campus level and at the central office level who not only understood the challenges of the campus, but were doing what it took to advocate on its behalf when staffing decisions occurred. Teachers are expected to differentiate to meet the needs of students and level the playing field (Gregory, 2013), yet the central office, based on the participants'



responses, was not held to the same standard to serve its unique campuses and ensure a level playing field for all USD schools and children.

Also, important to note is the literature on team decline. As open and transparent communication diminishes, in this case, between central office and the campus, the feelings of isolation heighten on the part of the campus. Teams cannot function without proper support and cohesion, a collective commitment to the best outcome for the team and all its members. Without trust, empathy, honest communication, and dependability of the leaders (district office) to do their part to benefit the team members (the schools), cohesion for the district and campus will not occur, and pathologies will continue to plague the organization, as the elite continue to self-promote, leaving others to suffer on their own (“How High,” 2017; Kanter, 2004).

*Hindered/Delayed distribution of resources.* The district engaged in Stage 4, inappropriate action toward Rise (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). Resources were mentioned by participants to have been withheld or delayed in distribution to the campus. In these accounts, RCHS, a Title I school, depended on the district for sufficient funds and resources to operate; however, on multiple occasions, as noted in declining civilizations and schools (Diamond, 2005; Duke, 2008, 2015; Hochbein, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008; Tainter, 1988), depleted resources and the careful rationing of those resources could contribute to decline. Moses insisted that when it “came down to resources,” he “always felt like with the district already having data,” knowing the needs of the campus, they “should have made every effort to make sure that those resources—putting tools in place,” were all provided, but he saw that it did not, because they “know you guys are not

going to meet expectations.” By Moses’s account, from the very beginning of the year, the campus leadership was setting RCHS up for failure.

Principals John and Tiffany simply wanted what was reasonable for each to run their school. John was plagued by an inherited \$200,000 budget deficit, and he pleaded not to start his tenure “behind the eight ball.” He insisted that, “everything I asked for, I had to beg them for it and they were hesitant. I was... If you’re wanting to save the school, then why do I get told ‘no’ every time I turn the corner?” Tiffany was shocked that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century she walked the halls of a building where she witnessed the following:

traditional blackboards from the 60s and 70s still existed in every classroom, and staff was still purchasing white and yellow chalk. Literally, there was no technology in the classrooms...The district did not come in and do a technology or instructional audit of the school and could blatantly see that this school had no resources to be able to be successful for children to even meet the minimum standards of the state exam.

Morale on the campus was deeply affected by the separate and unequal treatment of RCHS, according to Tiffany. Decades after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Rise continued to fall victim to oppressive practices within its own district. The psychological impact of that level of neglect had far reaching implications for the students, the faculty, the leadership and the community.

John shared, “I talk to your technology,... your curriculum,... to transportation people, and everywhere I turn, I get resistance.” John saw the biggest barrier to success at RCHS to be the perception that central office had of the school and its belief that big

investments will be cost-prohibitive, as research on declining civilizations recognizes (Diamond, 2005; Tainter, 1988).

There were other stories of mishandling of funding and the design process on a \$21 million bond for the school. In a meeting, when questioned about building and design, the district's "contracting guy...said, 'Once that bond is passed, the taxpayers don't tell us what to do with this money.'" That statement was incredulous to John. Also, RCHS was one of the first schools, by board approval, to receive one-to-one laptops for all students. The process was slow to move, and in asking about the setback, John was told by the head of the technology department that they were concerned that "your" kids would not take care of the technology. It was difficult enough for John to combat outside and media-projected impressions of the school. John's responses expressed he was noticeably tired that his district support systems, yet again communicated through their actions and words, "I got a bunch of criminals over here."

Both principals intimated that during these known and documented leadership transitions, it was the responsibility of the district to ensure the campus was still cared for in some capacity. It was clear to the two campus principals that they were the soldiers on the front line for their students. Unfortunately, the school was harmed and ill-equipped to fight due to the metaphoric friendly fire of central office.

**Stage 4 a campus in crisis.** A dangerous environmental condition of an organization in decline exists when it reaches a crisis. The crisis stage takes the form of a major threat or harm to the organization due to an external and/or internal force (Christensen, 1997; Dowell & Swaminathan, 2006; Duke, 2008; Short et al, 2007; Trahms et al., 2013; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989), and there is a risk of collapse or complete

depletion of resources. In the final portion of the interview, the participants responded to questions to determine in what ways the organization reached a point of *crisis*. At the crisis point, the organization has hit a stage where its very existence is threatened, and major events or shifts lead the organization into a spiral. Although participants mentioned different crisis-level issues such as low achievement scores, and losing faith in campus leadership, the emerging themes that surfaced as responses included significant compromises to an effective learning environment and the cycle of leadership turnover.

Table 10

*Stage 4 RCHS Campus in Crisis-Codes and Emerging Themes*

Codes	Themes
Discipline/Safety Absenteeism	Compromises to an Effective Learning Environment
Principal departures Last Minute Principal Appointments	Leadership Turnover Cycle

***Compromises to an effective learning environment.***

*Discipline/ Safety.* From the perspective of the principals, discipline and safety were interestingly mentioned as part of the crises that occurred prior to their arrival; however, they were not factored in as a crisis upon their departure. A crisis, Stage 4 of the predictable stages of organizational decline (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989) occurs when the organization is compromised and particularly vulnerable to other forces (Diamond, 2005; Tainter, 1988), forces that threaten the organization's very existence. The crises conveyed by participants Principal Tiffany were related to recent readings about the campus community safety prior to her becoming the chosen principal. In her research, Tiffany discovered and was stunned by the realization that RCHS was on the "FBI's

highest crime-rated area in the nation. And knowing that you had projects right across... the street from the school was an indicator that this school really needed support and that those were some of the contributing indicators...to the school's decline." Upon John's arrival, about three to four months after Tiffany's official departure, he surmised the following: "They," referring to RCHS, "were on the 10 o'clock news multiple times for safety and security issues. By John's account, the school was operating in chaos and minimum discipline. He asserted,

They [RCHS] were on the 10 O'Clock News multiple times for all kinds of riots and just all kinds of stuff that was going on at the school. Chaos that was going on at the school. Very little discipline, the environment was horrible.

John determined an urgent need to establish a sense of order following his assessment of the previous regime. Focused instruction could not happen if disorder and lack of safety were the prevailing problems within the school culture. Kathy, who was present from the beginning of Tiffany's leadership through the middle of John's tenure, noted during that window "there were a lot of suspensions" due to limited parental involvement as the campus was dealing with discipline problems. I lacked the documentation to corroborate or refute Kathy's assertion.

*Absenteeism.* Chronic absenteeism in a turnaround school reflects one of the predictable stages of decline, particularly crisis (Duke, 2008; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). In this stage, the initiative or motivation to persist in the challenging academic work becomes daunting for both students and the faculty. The team grapples with whether the amount and intensity of work are worth the effort, and the sacrifice (Kanter, 2004; Rotter, 1954; Wakeman, 2015). The immediate circumstance surrounding the individuals

overshadows their ability to visualize the goal. As a result of the discipline or lack thereof and nearing the close of the school year marked when crises emerged according to participants. The teacher participants observed very low teacher morale and motivation, which led to high absenteeism, teacher departure from the school or even from the profession altogether. Also, student absenteeism was an issue. Kathy twice noted the high student absentee rate as a crisis. Simon highlighted the student and teacher absenteeism problem as a crisis contributing to other crises, particularly achievement. He was aware that the state mainly was only concerned “if you met standard or not.” He observed teachers reaching a disturbing impasse in their career at Rise which led them to leave. He called attention to these discoveries:

I’ve seen teachers say, “I’m done because they have one bad day is all. Well, it’s not a one bad day, but that one day was the breaking point. I don’t need to take this. They don’t pay me enough to take this...not this. So, I’ll go somewhere else. I’ll do something else. I’ll sit down at home.”

He continued to describe that teachers would resolve to “just draw their money, that little \$5 or 10,000, and ... just live off it for several months and say, ‘I’ll do something else.’” He was empathetic towards the plight of these teachers, because he understood the work in a Title I, underperforming school with numerous internal and external challenges was not easy.

Unfortunately for RCHS, a teacher’s sudden and unpredicted departure would cause another ripple of crisis, leaving students in the hands of a substitute teacher the remainder of the year who may or may not be qualified in the content area. Kathy noted that several teachers left after a year with the new principal, others after the test scores

arrived toward the end of the school year. John, upon disclosing his imminent departure to the core teachers he hired, who were instrumental in improving instruction and test scores, shared, “When I left, they left because they saw what was fixing to go down.” Those who were loyal to Tiffany and/or in opposition to John’s new leadership left by the third year of the case study window. Several teachers again left Rise within one year of John’s departure. Duke (2008) documented how a series of conditions, not unlike the aforementioned, and challenges inadequately addressed can contribute to consequences such as resource reductions (Figure 1), in this case, human resource reductions. Despite the impetus for a teacher’s exit, children ultimately cannot learn, and the instructional program suffers greatly if the teachers are not present to educate.

***Leadership turnover cycle.***

*Principal departures.* This predictable Stage 4 crisis (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989) of leadership turnover reflects an environmental jolt (Trahms et al., 2013) to Rise Comprehensive School (RCHS). The crisis, defined in school decline terms, reflects direct or indirect consequences of inadequate and inappropriate response to challenges to the campus (Duke, 2006, 2008, 2015; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). Both principals, who share noted experience with turnaround efforts in urban schools, understand the dynamic shift toward decline that can occur when a leader leaves, especially if no leader is in place for the work to continue in the interim. For Tiffany, the crisis was the turnover, again, of leadership. The “reset” button, upon her leaving, was pushed “all over again. That is the damage that has been done through turnaround. That the leadership does not remain for at least three to five years. Or if the leadership is good, they’re quickly tapped and pulled to another school, which still leaves

unfortunately a leadership drought at some of the neediest schools in our city.” For John, the major crisis was his leaving so abruptly. Simon noted there was a personal issue that led to John’s leaving. John freely acknowledged, “The crisis was me leaving.” He also communicated the stakes involved with abrupt turnover when a leader is trying to change a campus.

You take your schools that are in trouble...they know it takes three to five years, but yet because of the political pressure, and the public perception, they want results faster than you’re capable of producing. That’s the problem.

Here, John intimated a number of external factors and the push for quick fixes may have contributed to his rapid departure. Reasons for leaving are dynamic, but the impact of the departure is far-reaching, for teachers, for the community, for the students.

Moses used vivid imagery to sum up his perspective of the dilemmas associated with school crisis brought about by departing leadership:

We were always on a rollercoaster. Bring somebody new in the school, and you’ll maybe see some changes for the better, then something would happen, and morale would decline. We shouldn’t have to lift a boulder from the bottom all over again. ...even without sustained leadership, you have to have some sustainable practices and standards, but unfortunately, they’re just not there.

Moses, with more than two decades of experience, astutely recognized the predictably temporal nature of a school like RCHS and its lingering effect on school morale, pride, and achievement. The waves of improvement and decline made the campus less appealing to candidates and more problematic to campus and district level employees.



*Last minute principal appointments.* Urban and turnaround school success is dependent on multiple factors. One key factor is the leader and his ability to prepare and strategically plan, along with his leadership team, to ensure academic achievement is priority (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2008, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008; Harris et al., 2010). Between 2009 and 2014, three principals were quick hires, unable to plan to the degree needed before starting the school year. Both Principals John and Tiffany started at Rise within weeks of the arrival of the teaching staff, according to their accounts. After John, the other principal was another quick-replacement, but he only lasted a year, and passed away, thus, initiating the search yet again for a new principal. Sadly, neither of the two principals interviewed mentioned that someone was already available on the campus to continue the work they began. The turnover can create a type of post-traumatic stress to faculty and staff who find themselves constantly in a state of insecurity without clear direction, focus on learning, positively trending data to motivate the staff, and systems in place to ensure sustainability (Duke, 2008; Harris et al., 2010).

Kathy and Simon, two strong teachers, unfortunately could not bear the rollercoaster journey themselves. Both went on to lead at other campuses, Simon, as a respected administrator at a popular and sought-after high school, and Kathy, as an esteemed ninth grade English teacher with a track record of success on the ninth grade state ELA exams. Each left a year after the leader who hired them departed, having given the successor an opportunity to sustain the improvements and having offered their support to build upon campus success. Frequent shifts in leadership “can be an antecedent as well as a consequence” (Murphy & Meyers, 2008, p 55-57). Demographic shifts in personnel, when a viable, trained replacement is not prepared, can become either

a challenge or a point of crisis threatening stability and program sustainability (Duke, 2008, 2015; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008).

#### **Chapter IV Summary**

This chapter included a descriptive case study analysis of the four predictable stages of school decline, based upon research questions developed from the Weitzel and Jonsson (1989) framework on organizational decline. Applying the etic and emic approaches of sensemaking (Merriam, 2009), the analysis drew connections of participant interviews to studies on civilization, organizational, team, and school decline, and leadership characteristics emphasized in the Chapter II Literature Review. I discovered emerging themes from each of the four stages of organizational decline; however, more themes emerged from to questions related to Stage 1: the blindness of the organization, and Stage 3: the inappropriate responses of the school to identified problems. The least responses were garnered from questions about Stage 2 that asked about ways in which the organization did not act; however, Stage 2 theme of unresponsiveness of the district helps to explain the challenges the campus faced which led to central office obstruction in Stage 3, an emic theme extracted from the study.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

The responsibility to educate every child is an overwhelming task, still public policies are ever-evolving to communicate that expectation to local districts. Public schools, not originally meant to serve all, are to-date still challenged to close opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995) particularly among students of color, low socioeconomic status and second language learners. Even in the most successful schools, decline becomes an inevitability. As the literature review suggests, civilizations, organizations, and teams decline with parallels to school decline (Table 1). Turnaround schools, notably, find themselves in repeated cycles of improvement, only to decline faster than they improved (Duke, 2006, 2008, 2015; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008).

Due to the gap in research on school decline, a descriptive case study was conducted to address four critical questions in an effort to further explore the phenomenon of school decline:

1. In what way(s) was the organization *blind* to early stages of decline?
2. In what way(s) did the organization *recognize* the need for change but took no action?
3. In what way(s) did the organization take *action*, but the action was inappropriate?
4. In what ways did the organization reach a point of *crisis*?

The final chapter is dedicated to discussing the key findings that support, refute, and/or extend knowledge beyond the current literature on school decline, identifying limitations

of descriptive case study research study, and exploring the implications of key findings for campus and district leadership and community stakeholders.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

In this section, I will highlight the six most prominent themes which emerged from the descriptive case study of school decline at Rise Comprehensive High School (RCHS) from 2009 to 2014 based on Weitzel and Jonsson's (1989) framework on predictable factors of organizational decline (Duke, 2006, 2007, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). First, I will further explore two codes within Stage 1 theme of *blindness* of the organization (Duke, 2008; Hochbein & Duke, 2008; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989). Secondly, I will discuss the implementation challenges to the campus and how they impact achievement. Thirdly, I will further explore an emic theme surrounding district responsiveness to RCHS. Next, I will provide further context to the limited findings related to the Stage 2 theme of *failure to act* and differentiate between the four stages of organizational decline in relation to the non-linear nature of school decline. Lastly, the limitation of the study and recommendations for further study will be discussed.

**Intentional blindness handicaps the organization.** Teachers Kathy and Simon, and Principals John, understanding the importance of their school's reputation, were compelled to explain the detrimental effects associated with not seeing the good things that were happening at RCHS. Kathy argued that her new principal, John, chose not to see the value in continuing an accelerated graduation program for overaged RCHS students which increased graduation rates significantly, despite her sharing the data and program logistics with her principal upon his arrival. Simon and Principal John proudly

shared the improved standardized state test scores under their leadership, especially in mathematics, knowing that the campus was never recognized by anyone at the executive level of the district or the community at large. Because of this deliberate lack of recognition within and outside of the campus, graduation rates decline immediately, and RCHS during the window of the study was not perceived to be a school that produced achievers. The participants contended leaders failed to see important activities and dynamics of the school that, if recognized, could have been built upon, and decline in achievement may not have occurred, at least not as swiftly. As literature on civilization decline recognizes, leaders and critical decision makers are sometimes too occupied looking at another issue, or the roots of the real issue can be so imperceptible, that the leaders fail to perceive the problem (Diamond, 2005; Greer 2011; Klein, 2015). It is not unimaginable that leaders fail to see real, well-disaggregated data and what could help the organization because of their focus on the negative, on the wrong population, or perhaps their paying attention to the inaccurate narratives of others. Findings in this study of blindness, note that not recognizing the early signs has a veiled alignment to Duke's (2008) model of school decline in the area of *challenges* to the school's ability to achieve its mission; however, Duke does not mention intentional blindness or what one could consider denial that certain issues exist, nor does he allude to being blind to the positive factors which counter decline. At the primary level of the school decline model (Duke, 2009, p. 63), the *challenges* listed are limited to the categories of resource reductions, official mandates and demographic changes. Denial of the attributes and/or challenges of a campus can cause the school's leaders to misdiagnose problems and respond inadequately and inappropriately.

**Strategic partnership unrealized by leadership.** Principals Tiffany and John sought relationships with individuals and groups to help with the internal work on the campus, perhaps failing to understand the most significant players outside of the school that could help support their work internally or singlehandedly sabotage their efforts to lead their campus. John engaged with the religious leaders of the community but limited his interaction with the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and Alumni Association. Conversely, Tiffany worked with PTO and the Alumni Association, but she admittedly missed opportunities by maintaining her focus primarily within the campus and not using her celebrity to go out into the community to engage and change the stakeholder perceptions of Rise Comprehensive High School. Her assistant principal even shared an anecdote about a disgruntled business owner who did not feel welcomed by the principal, so she rescinded her offer to work with the campus and possibly provide employment for some of the campus students. Both principals could have been more prudent in their response to community stakeholders who wanted to know more about the leader of RCHS and their vision for the school.

Literature from earlier case studies in Texas clustered one of the primary conditions of school decline to be parents and community (Duke, 2008; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Hochbein, 2012; Picucci, et al., 2002), Duke's model specified a condition of decline to be the school's inadequate community response. Based on participants' interview statements, the inadequacy of their response to the community was preceded by their failure to realize the significance of some of the community stakeholders and how they could become a viable partner with the campus.

**Internal gaps in knowledge.** Curriculum, instruction, and academic programming plans on the campus should be clear to all stakeholders, especially those who are charged to teach and lead, so students can master the articulated standards. Because of the high percentages of novice teachers on the Rise campus (zero to five years' experience) (Table 3), it is not surprising that student achievement suffered. In the seminal research by Brookover and Lezotte (1979) on school decline, they determined that the declining schools focused less than the improving schools on student mastery of reading and mathematics objectives. Having a strategic focus on reading and math necessitates that those who teach reading and math have a working knowledge of the content and required skills and that they are adept at delivering the content in a way that students can master it. Novice teachers tend to know the content, but as Simon intimated, they do not know the tested material. Both novice and ineffective teachers who, as the participants revealed, were constantly funneled into RCHS, lacked the pedagogical skillset and cultural capital (Gay, 1995, 2000) which would lessen time spent on discipline and increase instructional time. Principal Tiffany and math teacher, Simon, noted the lack of fundamental knowledge of effective instructional strategies rooted in cultural responsive pedagogy. As a result, teachers struggled to maximize learning and minimize discipline.

**Implementation challenges.** In the school decline model (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2011, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008), Duke mentions inadequate or failure to respond to programmatic and personnel needs. Each participant was convinced, and the data mostly proved, that certain programs on the campus needed to remain while others needed to be discontinued. Participants expressed their disappointment over one or more productive

programming or school system practices being discontinued or leadership persisting with a practice that did not yield positive results for the campus.

The discontinued practices were accelerated project graduation program for overaged students which Kathy advocated to continue, Tiffany's master scheduling which included double block math and English classes for ninth graders, systems put into place by John prior to his leaving, public celebrations of student achievement such as honor roll and instructional walkthroughs. Moses wanted to further develop his instructional leadership skills, so he really wished he could have continued the instructional walkthroughs and feedback cycle. A strong internal locus of control would have allowed Moses to persist in that practice. Unfortunately, he felt working in survival mode hindered his ability to continue in that practice. In contrast, the practices which persisted but were not necessarily positive for the campus or the students were the AVID program, ineffective grading practices, and the alternative program to the accelerated project graduation program. Many students suffered at the hands of teachers' grading practices which would include giving students 69s, forcing the students to risk dropping out or not matriculating to the next class.

Overall, the factors which determine if a program stays or goes should be the outcome data. Another early indicator of school decline was poor or nonexistent data driven decision-making (Duke, 2008). The state agency data suggest that the program used to accelerate students' earning credit was successful, yet the program was dissolved. Some of RCHS's highest graduation rates resulted from that accelerated program begun in 2009-10 school year. Culture building activities such as celebrating student achievement and promoting academic excellence helped to develop the affective element



of the campus; however, the practice or tradition did not remain. There are times when a struggling school is limited by funds, so the campus may not be able to implement all the plans it would like. At that point, the school must prioritize its programming wish list by the biggest need, not want, and base those prioritized decisions on outcomes.

**Role and reaction of the district—emic theme emerged.** The most compelling themes were related to the direct impact of the district level support services on the campus, namely the inaction of the district at Stage 2 and its ineffective responses to identified problem(s) at Stage 3. In the literature on predictive factors of organizational decline and parallels to the constructs of civilization, teams, and schools (Diamond, 2005; Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008; Kanter, 2004; Tainter, 1988; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989), the behavior of the upper level leadership was noted by both principals, the assistant principal, and the math teacher. Key decision makers failed to abandon ineffective practices such as withholding resources, delaying distribution of resources, and limiting the pool of teachers to the least viable candidates due to deeply-rooted values or beliefs as explained by both principals.

Also, the literature on team dynamics states an unhealthy reliance on the stars of the group overshadows the talent and potential of the whole (Kanter, 2004). The reference to “star” reliance perhaps explains why the district was slow to respond to provide RCHS students much needed resources such as the one-to-one laptops. The participants’ memories of how the district and central office personnel treated the school shows the immense and demoralizing pain associated with feelings of neglect, abandonment, mistreatment and sabotage. The district stars were other schools, like Vanderbilt High School, who helped the district shine, campuses that met state standards

on exams or those that did not seem to be a blemish on the reputation of the district. Those favored campuses had better “credit scores,” and as a result, opportunities, information, and resources were more quickly funneled to the campuses, while the poorly scored Rise Comprehensive High School would scramble for the same resources. Achievement suffered, because RCHS was perceived to be less likely to be a good steward of the opportunities, information, and resources to be given. Every RCHS administrator participant and the one teacher who is currently an assistant principal revealed their awareness of the importance of the relationship between campus and district. A constant battle for support and acknowledgement, as described by multiple participants, further discouraged the members of the organization to aspire to the best if treated among the worst.

**No stage 2 inaction within the organization.** The findings revealed that no participant concluded complete inaction at the campus level to any identified problems. The pressure, however, to do something, was ever-present at Rise, as the state education agency, district’s mid management and cabinet level leadership were looking. The misstep, then, for the campus was perhaps its hasty response to the pressure to perform. Moving too quickly without thoroughly investigating the root threats to student achievement could lead the organization to misdiagnose and respond equivocally to the problem(s) within, as revealed in earlier research by Duke (2008). Also, the lack of availability of four years of campus improvement plans shows a failure on the part of either the campus leadership, the district leadership, or both to properly archive information that would prove invaluable to the subsequent campus leadership. Moving too soon or not at all correlates to school decline.

In addition, the district chose two principals with a track record of success with turnaround schools, so due to their experience, the principals leapt into their role, quickly diagnosing and implementing, while also falling into the traps of what was noted in the research on civilizations in decline: making decisions while lacking much needed historical context to help the leader foresee a recurring challenge, or using old methods to address a new and unperceived problem (Diamond, 2005). For a school like Rise which possesses deeply entrenched norms, values as well as powerful community stakeholder forces at play, the principals may have attempted different approaches had they been more aware of those dynamics.

### **Limitations to the Study**

Qualitative research is an interpretive form of inquiry in which the researcher attempts to understand and interpret a social phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Limitations include the inability to generalize to a larger population, because the study is bound by a specific time, place and set of participants. In qualitative research, I must also be aware of my own biases as they shape my interpretation of the data collected and analyzed.

This descriptive case study, retrospective in nature, attempted to maximize accurate recall and reveal potential sources of error or bias to capture the dynamics surrounding the phenomenon of school decline. In a post facto analysis, the likelihood of error is high due to the “limited and imprecise memory” (Hochbein & Duke, 2008, p. 364) of the participant. Each participant endeavored to remember accounts with as much accuracy as possible, understanding that some pieces may be slightly inaccurate. The descriptive data from the state education agency and district research and accountability department were useful to corroborate or challenge assertions by and memories of the

participants. Some inaccuracies in the participants' interpretation affirmed the realization that there were areas of blindness within the organization.

Another limitation of the study was the absence of a district level participant who worked directly with RCHS during the window of the study. There were five participants of this study, including two campus principals, one assistant principal, and two teachers. The small sample size and specific context of this study do not lend themselves to generalize findings. Insight from an important mid-management leader, however, may have explained the context of district decision-making or lack thereof that impacted the studied campus. Despite the limitations, valuable information was gathered to add to the body of research on school decline.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the results of this case study, I present the following recommendations for further study:

**Mid-management impact on school decline.** School decline is a challenging phenomenon to study due to its retrospective nature (Hochbein & Duke, 2008), and it is vastly understudied in both qualitative and quantitative arenas. In this case study, I discovered the impact of district, centralized leadership on achievement, morale, and self-perception of the campus served was significant. Inequitable practices regarding recruitment and hiring yielded further inequities among schools. I recommend further studies on school decline that include examining the involvement of central office or district, centralized leadership with a campus in decline, and central office and district leadership may contribute to school decline.

**Conditions of good practice.** The interviews revealed that even during periods of school decline when note-worthy practices were planned and implemented that yielded positive results for students, some critical members of the leadership ignored the practices or initiated others which were not effective for the school. One of the aspects of the iterative process of school decline is *condition* and the school's inadequate response to those conditions (Duke, 2008; Hochbein, 2012; Hochbein & Duke, 2008). I recommend conducting further studies that examine the positive activities and programming that may serve to delay decline which incoming leadership may have failed to recognize. Studies in this area address school *blindness*, specifically the discontinuance of programming that works.

**Push/pull high school enrollment factors.** The school, Rise Comprehensive HS, suffered from dwindling enrollment, and hundreds of students left that community school to attend other, more esteemed schools. I recommend further study on push factors that make students leave their community school and pull factors which draw them to other schools. Findings could prove helpful to campuses' improving their marketing and ensuring they offer what the community determines to be needed in order to steer students back in the direction of their zoned or home comprehensive school.

**Community engagement.** The study revealed the principals who participated in the interviews were challenged by their lack of engagement with some of their community stakeholders who were willing to increase their investment in the campus and engage in relationship building efforts with the principal for that relationship to develop. I recommend further studies that determine common community engagement practices

for Title I campus leaders to enhance community partnerships and avoid relationship pitfalls.

### **Implications for District and Campus Leadership**

**Eye-opening briefing of the incoming principal.** The findings of this study present opportunities for district leadership to consider for growth. To address the area of intentional blindness within the organization, incoming principals can benefit from having access to a dossier of accumulated information stored by the district and campus regarding specific community background of the school and information on key stakeholders as he/she is onboarded. The principal must still do his/her due diligence to survey the school and its community; however, loss of valuable time may be minimized with the provision of background information not otherwise available through the state education agency data or common means. The research provides evidence to support district level briefing of the incoming campus principal regarding *campus improvement plan(s), effective practices that yielded successful results, and other internal data* to properly onboard a new leader and prevent the cycle of decline.

**Addressing novice, ineffective teacher challenges.** Another implication for district and campus leadership involves teacher preparation and professional development support. Lack of teacher competency in the areas of curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy has a significant impact on student achievement and can serve as a large contributor to school decline. The district can respond to this gap in scaffolded stages through a strategic partnership with the campus in need. First, the district can use its database researchers to determine campuses with high percentages of novice teachers,

cluster the campuses, and lead in differentiated professional development for the identified teachers, primarily in reading and mathematics skills and culturally responsive pedagogy. Targeted district training to meet the needs of its identified teachers accompanied by follow-up campus support and tracking student progress data can prove invaluable to teachers and students.

**Transitional leadership prep programming.** Participants shared how the campus was forced to undergo the full vetting process each time a principal left abruptly. The research from this study provides evidence to support shadowing and internship opportunities for the assistant principal to help build internal capacity, so interim leadership transitions can occur as protect the campus from unnecessary jolts to the campus. District leadership can support the campus leader by implementing a coaching model to prepare the assistant principal/dean for next level leadership in case any unexpected departure occurs with the established principal. Shadowing and internship opportunities for the assistant principal could help campuses evade the crisis stage which tends to reoccur in turnaround school.

**Improving the hiring pool practices.** Participants shared their concern for the lack of support to secure quality educators and the district's push to populate the campus with teachers, regardless of their status or effectiveness. Also, a social justice, inequity concern surfaced as participants described how their poor performing school received the less experienced, less effective educators to teach young people with the highest needs. One of the participants explained a creative strategy used for locating good candidates. The district could create a system, inspired by the strategy of actively recruiting from a hiring pool of viable, researched, but unchosen candidates who applied for more desirable

schools. Districts already have practices of monetarily incentivizing, so teachers can work in high needs campuses; however, there is potential for the recruitment of these teachers to be a more personalized process in an effort not only to hire but to also seek three or more years' commitment. The district's human resources department has an opportunity to create and utilize a hiring protocol, developed in partnership with the campuses, that utilizes a specialized interview protocol and some assessment to determine the culturally responsive skillset of the educator. The research from this study provides evidence to support the district human resource department's creation of a more effective teacher recruitment and school marketing system that involves actively recruiting from a hiring pool of viable, researched candidates who were not selected from more desirable schools. Given the nationwide teacher hiring crisis, finding the best way to recruit and prepare educators for effective teaching and learning, is a daunting challenge, one worthy of pursuit for the sake of our youth.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the predictable stages of school decline through a descriptive campus case study, including the retrospective view of five participants who were leaders on the campus during periods of improvement and decline. The research on decline in the context of civilizations, organizations, teams and schools have documented parallels; however, a gap in literature on the topic of school decline remains due to the resistance of potential subjects to exposure of their vulnerabilities in a formal research setting and/or acknowledgement of self-imposed challenges which may have contributed to school decline.



This study contributes to the body of research on school decline and identification of implications for leadership at the campus and district levels. The study also reveals that the predictable stages of organizational decline for a campus exist, but mostly in two stages: blindness to the problem and inappropriate action. These predictable stages of school decline providing further challenge to the campus and district leaders, implying an urgent need for strategic and anticipatory approaches to interrupt and/or redirect school decline. School decline remains an understudied phenomenon in educational research and necessitates further qualitative and quantitative study.

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**Appendix A**

**Turnaround School Participant Request Letter**

Dear Turnaround School Leader

I am contacting you today to request your participation in some important current research, by allowing me to study your perceptions on dynamics surrounding your former school and revisit possible predictors of school decline. As a sitting urban school dean of instruction, aspiring principal, and University of Houston doctorate candidate, I am highly interested in being able to dissect and perform an academic “autopsy” on a turnaround campus which, after experiencing marked successes, unfortunately returned to stages of decline. The information gathered from your turnaround school decline story will help empower other turnaround leaders in urban public schools to avoid potential pitfalls to school success and student achievement and hopefully continue leading a campus along a positive trajectory.

If you wish to join, I will keep the time commitment to a minimum. Essentially I will ask that I be able to interview you to articulate your personal experiences and recollection of the people, entities, structures, and events that may have contributed to school decline.

Additionally, I will seek to understand what practices you and your team engaged in in retrospect that may have impacted school decline. I recognize that discussions about school decline and failure may be an uncomfortable topic; however, I am convinced that your story and those of other urban school leaders will help others in our field to increase their awareness and responsiveness to the needs of the school and the students therein.

This story will also be supplemented by analyzing archived documents such as campus improvement plans, the school website, and/or other campus documents you deem useful. No students will be interviewed in the study. The total time commitment for interviews will not exceed 1 hour without your consent.

I sincerely hope that you will consider becoming a part of this research study. It will assist other leaders in understanding a critical element that has plagued many of our best-intentioned schools. If you choose to participate, please let me know by responding to this letter via email. Should you agree, I would like to schedule time to speak with you and your direct supervisor to gain consent to do this research. If you do not wish to participate, no further action is required.

Knowledge sharing from one educator to another can by default assist other children in their academic success. Your voice in this research is a necessary one to provide a unique perspective from your leadership role. Should you have any clarifying questions, or need any additional information, please email me at [samanhabrooks333@gmail.com](mailto:samanhabrooks333@gmail.com) or call my cell at 713-294-3448.

Thank you for your time and consideration in participating in this study. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,  
Samantha Brooks

Ed. D. Candidate, University of Houston

*Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. The choice to participate is at your sole discretion and not required by your school or school district. You may withdraw from participation in the study at any time by informing the primary or student researcher. No students will be interviewed in this research, and no incentives will be offered for your involvement. Your responses will be completely confidential.*

*Confidentiality will be upheld by using pseudonyms to mask the name of the school and yourself as a participant. Neither your name nor the name of your school will be disclosed by the student researcher in the final case study report, unless your school district provides express written consent to do otherwise that is agreed upon by every participant. In addition, absolute compliance with all district regulations and policies of involving research in the school will be upheld.*



## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Interview Protocol**

## PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

School \_\_\_\_\_ Position \_\_\_\_\_

## Introduction

- Welcome
- Purpose of the study
  - To more deeply understand the predictors of school decline
- Provide and explain the informed consent form
  - Provide a common definition of school decline to frame the interview
  - Provide a brief overview of the timeline of focus where noticeable decline occurred
  - Provide in advance the interview questions to give the participants time to recall their memory of the events addressed
  - Build trust through sharing: Information is de-identified, any write ups of data names will be replaced, and participants will have the opportunity to review all transcripts prior to submission
- Interview 1: Solicit background information on participant and his/her journey to RCHS
- Interview 2: Provide the structure of the interview (45-60 minutes) and the areas it will address. Use semi-structured interview protocol

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Focus Questions: **Stage 1: The Organization is Blind to the Early Stages of Decline**

*Research shows that a characteristic of organizations in decline is their inability to see the early stages of decline. These questions will seek to understand in hindsight if any*

*early stages of decline were evident but unperceived at the time during your tenure at Rise High School*

1. In hindsight, can you *recall any early warning signs/problems that were missed within the campus* that may have contributed to school decline?
  - Personnel shifts (leadership, teaching, support staff, etc.)
  - School wide practices
  - Resources
  - Students
  - other
  
2. In hindsight, can you *recall any warning signs/problems that were missed (from outside the campus)* that may have contributed to school decline?
  - District or state influences/pressures
  - Community Stakeholder influences/pressures
  - other

**Focus Questions: Stage 2: The Organization Recognizes the Need for Change but Takes No Action**

*Many schools are data rich, but don't always know what to do with the information provided to positively impact achievement results. Through the following set of questions, I'd like to understand when and where the organization determined there was a need for change but failed to act.*

3. Did you notice areas in the school's structure, operation, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and/or culture/climate that needed adjustment, but the change(s) did not occur? Please provide specific examples

- What was your evidence that change was necessary?
- What or who hindered the change(s)?
- Was inaction the only option? Please explain.

Focus Questions: **Stage 3: The Organization Takes Action, but the Action is**

**Inappropriate**

*Research indicates that organizations may take action to address the perceived problem or issue that threatens the organization; however, they mistakenly and inappropriately address the issue. As a result, the trajectory toward decline continues or may even accelerate. This set of questions will aim to discover missteps in the organization's decision making that negatively impacted school and student achievement.*

4. Where/How did the organization get it wrong, meaning, when did the school attempt to address any problem(s), but did not solve it or address it appropriately to yield positive results for students?
5. Who/What influenced the organization's active misstep?
6. What would have been an appropriate response to the issue(s) you mentioned?

Focus Questions: **Stage 4: The Organization Reaches a Point of Crisis**

*Low achievement always places a campus on the radar of many groups, from community stakeholders to district leadership. Crisis denotes a turning point within the organization of such intense trouble or challenge, that serious decisions must be made. These questions aim to discover where crisis was evident and/or imminent.*

7. Can you describe when the organization was in intense trouble?
8. Were there specific individuals or groups who understood and communicated the crisis?
9. If not, why not?

If so, how did stakeholders respond to the communication

**Appendix C**  
**IRB Approval**