

HOW DO WE TAKE CARE OF OUR OWN?
PRINCIPAL SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT IN ROCKY TOP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my maternal grandparents, Mary and Joe Whitaker, who taught me the value of an education at an early age and to my father who always wanted me to be a principal.

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ABSTRACT

HOW DO WE TAKE CARE OF OUR OWN? PRINCIPAL SUPPORT AND
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Jennifer Shaw Griffin

Western Carolina University (February 2017)

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Principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale. The role of the principal has become increasingly complex and demanding especially within the current accountability model with the public nature of school report cards. This is a problem in Rocky Top Public Schools and in school districts across the country. The purpose of this improvement effort is to provide support to decrease feelings of isolation and improve principal morale.

Rocky Top Public Schools is an urban school system and one of three school systems in Carter County, North Carolina. Rocky Top Public Schools was designated as low performing under state legislation for the 2014-2015 school year. The pressures from this designation exacerbate the issues of low morale and isolation as principals seek additional ways to quickly improve student achievement.

In the absence of resources and structures designed to support principals, principals collaborated to support one another as a community of learners. As an intervention, a structured professional learning community (PLC) with mentoring was implemented, so principals could engage in job-embedded inquiry and meaningful

reflective dialogue. Improvement science was used as the framework to implement the change, an initiative to provide support to principals, and the impact of the change on the system will be measured to determine if the change is an improvement. Qualitative measures were used to collect data and study participant perceptions of the impact of the intervention. Reflection on the process applied revealed the PLC was functioning as a Community of Practice. The assessment of the effectiveness of the Community of Practice was analytic auto-ethnographic, relying on field notes, interviews, and journal reflections from a complete member researcher. Analysis of the findings suggest the intervention combats isolation and builds trust among participants.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale. The School Leaders Network (2012) report on principal turnover captures the challenges faced by educational leaders in the era of high stakes accountability and increasing public demands for high student achievement. “The job is simply too complex, too poorly constructed, too isolating. School leaders lack the ongoing support and development required to maintain and foster the sustained commitment” (p. 1).

School administrators are expected to be experts on the job from day one. In addition to management tasks, principals are charged with being instructional leaders in the building and feel the weight of the pressure of legislative mandates, high-stakes accountability, and shrinking budgets (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005, 2007; Searby, 2010). The complexity of the job layered on top of the public scrutiny of current accountability measures has resulted in fewer people interested in becoming a principal (Butler, 2008; Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2006). The job has been described as isolation in a fishbowl because principals are both isolated and exposed (Evans, 2010). Principals do not have peers within their building with whom to discuss daily challenges or brainstorm improvement strategies; yet face scrutiny with a public accountability model and legislated removal from the position.

Significance of the Problem

Principals are second only to teachers in terms of impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Yet, few supports are in

place to ensure the success of novice principals. Because of the impact principals have on student achievement, efforts should be made to cultivate strong leadership. In some states, nearly half of principals leave during their third year (Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012). The impact of turnover is especially harmful on low performing schools that have more difficulty recruiting and retaining principals (Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd & Vigdor, 2008). Research shows principal development has a positive impact on school improvement. Not only will a focus on principal development and support improve academic achievement, but it will support equitable outcomes, particularly in high needs schools and districts (School Leaders Network, 2014). The intention of this study is to provide support to novice principals in order to decrease isolation and improve morale.

Rationale for this Study within the Laboratory of Practice

Experiencing the challenges as a first year principal, I endeavored to find supports to address the unique challenges that the position must address including the demands of the accountability model, the managerial tasks, the pressures of being the instructional leader, and the overwhelming sense of responsibility of the role. Having experienced the supports provided a beginning teacher in the state of North Carolina; I was surprised at the absence of policy for structured support of beginning principals. There is no state policy requiring support of new principals beyond the university internships completed prior to licensure as a school administrator. Support for principals is left to local education agencies to determine what, if any supports are provided to novice principals. Any support provided to principals by local education agencies is delivered without the benefit of state or federal funding (B. Mundy, personal communication, November 6,

2016). Any monetary support for novice or experienced principals would be allocated at the local level, further straining limited resources. In the absence of this support, principals are left to work largely alone in their buildings with little collegial interaction. I recognized quickly as a novice principal that the demands of the job exacerbate the feelings of isolation from peers with few opportunities to interact. Learning that fifty percent of principals quit during their third year in the role (School Leaders Network, 2014), I became concerned about my own longevity and the impact of high turnover at the principal level on the students and teachers I so deeply desire to help.

In addition to the students and teachers I desire to help, I also desire to support and help my principal colleagues in Rocky Top Public Schools (RTPS). My previous role in Rocky Top Public Schools was K-12 Curriculum Specialist, working with principals and teachers. A large part of my role as Curriculum Specialist was to support beginning teachers and lateral entry teachers during their first three years of service. In addition, I offered support to experienced teachers during curricular transitions. One of the last large projects I worked with prior to becoming a principal was the implementation of Common Core and North Carolina Essential Standards. While teachers had a large volume of work to do, I realized during this project that principals had an enormous amount of content to digest. In addition, principals had to support significant shifts in pedagogical delivery. In reflecting on my experience, I recognized the depth of impact the instructional leader plays in a school building, and I felt a strong desire to help. My desire to support principals more effectively led me to seek licensure as a school administrator. My intent was not to become a principal myself, as I knew the

demands of the job were significant and the challenges plentiful, particularly in the past several years. My intent was to improve my efficacy as a support resource for schools.

In spite of my reservations, I accepted a position as a principal at an elementary school in the fall of 2015 and immediately felt the pressures and challenges associated with the role as documented in the literature. As a principal participating in the intervention described in this study, I am both a benefactor of the study, and the researcher. This perspective provides unique insights describing the benefits of participation and the limitations of the study. Principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale. The purpose of the intervention in this study is to decrease feelings of isolation and improve principal morale through the creation of a professional learning community (PLC) for principals.

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH EVIDENCE OF THE PROBLEM

Through personal experience as a building level principal, I recognize the feelings of overwhelming responsibility and the isolation of the position. Few opportunities to interact with other building level leaders combined with high stakes testing create a tremendous amount of anxiety and pressure to perform and improve student outcomes. The pressure has an impact on principal morale. The literature reflects these feelings and experiences in schools across the nation (Beisser, 2016).

History and Review of the Problem

The role of the principal has changed in recent years. Community demands to influence educational decision making have never been so great, and principals are called upon to address more social, economic, and political issues that impact the school (Daresh, 2007; Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2006; James-Ward, 2011). The expectation is that principals focus nearly all of their attention on improving student achievement and also skillfully manage fiscal and educational accountability. A 2012 MetLife survey found the following:

Nearly half or 48% of principals feel under great stress several days a week and 69% say the job responsibilities are not similar to five years ago. Also, 75% of principals feel the job has become too complex. Principal job satisfaction decreased nine percentage points from less than five years ago to 59% in 2012 compared to 68% in 2008. (p. 5).

The complexity of the job of principal could be a deterrent to those who might consider the position. With the clear impact of the principal on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-

Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003), school districts seek qualified candidates in the midst of a shrinking candidate pool.

Finding and retaining quality principals is a task complicated by turnover in the superintendent role. My own district, Rocky Top Public Schools, has been led by six superintendents in nine years. The average tenure in the Superintendent's position is 3.2 years, with even higher turnover rates in lower performing or high poverty districts. (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). Rocky Top Public Schools has experienced the difficulties of building and maintaining a strong school district with turnover in key positions. Without skillful leaders, schools will not successfully meet the high expectations imposed on schools today, but finding and keeping qualified candidates is becoming more challenging (Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2006).

Research clearly shows the role of principal has an impact on school improvement and student achievement (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003) In fact, the role of principal is second only to that of teaching among factors that impact student achievement (James-Ward, 2011, Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that despite the challenges, districts find ways to support and cultivate school leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015). This challenge may be even more daunting in Rocky Top Public Schools, identified as low-performing in fall of 2015.

Recent legislation mandating a much more public reporting of school achievement and the added responsibilities that come with additional high-stakes accountability measures have intensified the pressures already present day to day (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). Further, being isolated from one another and the absence of other supports contributes to the pressures associated with school leadership. The types of support provided for principals must combat the impact isolation has on morale and retention.

Profound isolation is often cited as one of the reasons principals leave the job (Johnson, 2005; Neale & Cone, 2013). Facing complex leadership tasks, principals often feel isolated. Like most districts across the nation, our district holds monthly principal meetings, but the agendas of the meetings are pre-determined by district leaders, leaving no time for collective problem solving, reflective dialogue, or free discussion (see Appendix A for sample principals meeting agenda). Instead, the monthly meetings are more focused on task oriented topics, achievement data or budgetary items as opposed to the processes and practices that lead to organizational improvement (School Leaders Network, 2012). The public reporting of school performance and school grades creates a competition among principals which may impact willingness to collaborate and contributes to an even greater sense of isolation. The increasing demands on principals' time limits the opportunities for collaboration and interaction beyond the commitments that are a part of each day, exacerbating the overwhelming and isolating nature of the role.

Review of the Literature

An initial scan of the literature for principal support yielded a large number of articles explaining how principals support teachers in buildings. Until I used the key word churn, I did not find information about support for the role of principal. The word churn refers to the amount of turnover in the position. The lack of research outlining support for principals implies principal support is not easily accomplished or that principal support is not viewed as key to the mission of schools and districts.

What was clear from the initial scan of the literature is the importance of school leadership (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). School leadership plays a critical role in creating successful learning environments and improving efficiency and equity of schooling (James-Ward, 2011; Tornsen, 2010). Research shows that effective schools have effective principals (James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). A commitment by districts to support and retain the principal would be a sound investment to promote effective schools. In spite of that, most principals do not have an ongoing system of support (Neale & Cone, 2013).

Digging deeper into the literature describing principal churn, I discovered the challenges to effective leadership are well documented. These pressures have an impact on principal morale. Public accountability and higher academic standards have resulted in increased demands on school leadership, especially in the last few years (MetLife,

2012). The challenges facing school principals have resulted in attention to two specific areas, principal preparation and principal evaluation (School Leaders Network, 2012). Many master's level programs for principal preparation in North Carolina have reported smaller enrollment since the state eliminated higher pay for master's degrees. Master's degrees in education programs in North Carolina saw a drop in enrollment ranging from 7% at some universities, up to 65% at others in 2013, the year the state eliminated master's pay (Ovaska-Few, 2015). While a great deal of attention has been focused on improving the content in the preparation program, a focus on preparation alone ignores the lack of supports in place once a principal is in the field (School Leaders Network, 2012). The assumption of this focus is that principal turnover is a result of inadequate principal preparation. This assumption detracts attention from other issues that could result in high turnover rates, particularly in high poverty schools. Examination of principal preparation neglects to address the importance of ongoing job-embedded supports for principals.

National studies on leadership training suggest that effective leadership is not cultivated during preparation programs, but over time as leadership develops in practice. (Chitpin, 2014; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008; School Leaders Network, 2014). Original training and preparation can be lacking. (Neale & Cole, 2013; School Leaders Network, 2014). A national study on leadership training shows that powerful leadership does not take place during principal preparation programs, but principals continue to learn while they lead (Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008). As leadership is developed, districts have an opportunity to support professional growth with additional structures for collaboration and communication. Most principals, including those in RTPS do not have an ongoing

system of support or many opportunities for professional learning. Professional learning and reflective practice allow a principal to develop a conceptual understanding of what their job should be as opposed to a theoretical assumption or publically held misconception (Bengtson, Airola, Peer, & Davis, 2012), but school environments can be isolating and are not conducive to reflection, collaboration and adult learning (Chitpin, 2014; Neale & Cone, 2013; School Leaders Network, 2014). Cultivating principal leadership is important because there is a direct link between support for adult learning and improved student achievement (DuFour, 2007; Guskey, 1999; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003).

Fewer incentives exist to attract quality candidates to education in general in North Carolina and to the role of principal specifically. North Carolina is among the 10 worst states for principal churn, with an average tenure for a principal in the same building ranging from 2.7 years to 3.5 years, which is the lowest in the nation (School Leaders Network, 2012). The mean wage for principals in North Carolina was \$68,530 in 2015 compared to the national mean of \$93,120 (Bonner, 2016). Principal churn is not exclusive to North Carolina. In some states, nearly half of all principals leave the post within five years (Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012). According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics JOLT report, only three other industries have higher turnover than school principals: mining and logging, retail trade, and leisure and hospitality. Only leisure and hospitality workers leave more often than principals in high poverty schools. With such a high turnover rate, an investment of time to determine the cause of the turnover could potentially save the costs associated with rehire because of attrition. Districts seek highly qualified leaders because of their

significant impact on student achievement. The shrinking candidate pool coupled with high turnover makes hiring and retaining principals difficult.

While the research clearly documents the feelings of isolation and absence of professional learning, there are few documented interventions to address these issues. With the current policy landscape, the development of leadership as a focus has promise particularly for low-performing schools and districts as a means of improving student outcomes (Airola, Bengtson, Davis, & Peer, 2014). Currently, district supports for leadership are typically in the form of monthly principals meetings that feature prescribed or predetermined agendas that leave little or no time for responsive and collaborative job embedded discussion or reflection (see Appendix A). Even though most principals report feeling alone, separated, and not a part of the whole, most districts do not intentionally address principal isolation or have structures in place to foster collaboration across schools (Chitpin, 2013; Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Neale & Cone, 2013).

Mounting evidence shows the importance of instructional leadership at the district level and district personnel as key providers of job-embedded support for school leaders (Chitpin, 2013; Daly et al., 2015; Honig, 2012). This type of district support is a critical factor to promote a culture of professional learning (Chitpin, 2013). District offices are not typically designed or focused on the development of instructional leadership (Honig, 2012). As a result, job-embedded supports are largely lacking as most professional experiences from the district level are designed to support more technical aspects of the work (Neale & Cone, 2013). While necessary, this type of support does not develop the instructional leadership that impacts student achievement and school improvement.

Contributing to the isolation principals report feeling are many factors including the lack of structures and opportunities for communication and collaboration. Principals in the 21st century face a great deal of public accountability (Neale & Cole, 2013). Such complex demands on building leaders cannot be met in isolation (Drago-Severson, 2009). Effective interventions will improve morale, trust, and communication through collaboration to reduce feelings of isolation. Research supports the notion that job-embedded support, collaborative study and reflection will result in improved moral and sense of connection for school principals (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2014). The challenges facing educators are so highly contextual and often involve spontaneous and unique experiences with others in the school setting. As a result, “reflection in action and collective inquiry are to play significant roles in the continuing development of principals – development that is essential in pursuing changing organizational culture, practice, and performance through communities of practice or professional learning communities.” (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2009). Interaction with others who share the same role and work in the same context holds potential to support professional growth and improvement.

The impact of the principal on teachers and students is clear in the literature (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015). Children’s well-being and academic achievement are positively influenced by teachers and principals who felt supported in their own development (Drago-Severson, 2009). What is less prevalent is definitive actions to develop and cultivate leadership for principals. Research on educational leadership outlines the importance of principals to act as instructional leaders in the building and the importance of job-embedded support for

principals to accomplish this goal (Honig, 2012). For schools identified as low performing, external sources of leadership development improve efficacy and indirectly support improved academic performance (Airola, Bengtson, Davis, & Peer, 2014). A research study in Arkansas of 27 principals in low performing schools showed a direct link between external leadership development and an improved sense of efficacy, especially in the area of instructional leadership (Airola, Bengtson, Davis, & Peer, 2014). The theoretical framework used in the Arkansas study relied upon reflection in action. Participants involved in the study who were immersed in reflection in action experienced meaningful change in personal and organizational performance (Bengtson, Airola, Peer & Davis, 2012). For leaders of low-performing schools, this type of professional growth experience supports positive growth and improvement.

Principals were likely informal leaders in their buildings before becoming principals (Ponomareva, 2015). As informal leaders, their skills were cultivated with multiple opportunities for professional growth and development and interaction with peers. In order to be licensed as a principal in North Carolina, principals must complete a licensure program at the master's level or a graduate certificate program in educational leadership. However, once becoming a principal, growth opportunities may not be as frequent due to the demands on the time of the principal and lack of professional growth opportunities designed for practicing principals. Being a principal requires long hours spent supporting others, but very little or no time is spent in professional experiences designed to cultivate more effective leadership practices.

Without the support to meet the many challenges of their work, many principals leave for places that provide more support (Donaldson, 2008). A 2014 research study by The Leaders Network cited four reasons principals leave the profession.

1. Extensive workload preventing more meaningful instructional leadership tasks.
2. Exponential personal costs from long hours, a toll on physical and psychological health and well-being.
3. Policies that tie hands.
4. Profound isolation.

Knowing that 50% of principals quit during their third year (The Leaders Network, 2014), action should be taken to proactively address issues frequently identified as reasons principals leave. North Carolina is in the top 10 worst states for principal retention, with an average of 2.7-3.5 years tenure for principals at the same school. This statistic is alarming considering research also shows that it takes three to five years for principals to mobilize their vision (The Leaders Network, 2014). A NAESP study found in order to support principal persistence on the job and to support continuously driving improvement efforts, the isolation and frustration felt must be addressed (Protheroe, 2008).

Low Performing Schools Legislation

Policy makers are increasingly holding schools and particularly principals responsible for student achievement while simultaneously adding additional unfunded mandates (Spillane & Hunt, 2010). North Carolina's legislation to identify schools using letter grades is one example of the public scrutiny principals face. The letter grades are

reported out of context and have been criticized as better predictors of poverty rather than impact of the instruction within the school (NC Policy Watch, 2015). Twenty-eight percent of the schools in North Carolina received a D or F on the school report card. All of the schools receiving a D or F have student poverty rates exceeding 50% (NC Policy Watch, 2015). The research suggests that leadership would be a critical factor to improve achievement in low performing schools (Shirell, 2016). However, these schools have higher turnover rates for principals as compared to higher performing schools (Shirell, 2016).

The policy that grades the schools in North Carolina (N.C.G.S. 115C-105.37) has had a significant impact on Rocky Top Public Schools with the additional provisions identifying low performing schools and districts. Principals in Rocky Top Public Schools face additional pressures for improved academic achievement with the passing of the legislation that identified the district as low-performing. This legislation requires significant academic improvement or principals can be moved from their school or dismissed if school achievement remains a D or F, which is considered low performing (N.C.G.S. 115C-105.37). The legislation states:

Within 30 days of the initial identification of a school as low-performing, whether by the local school administrative unit under G.S. 115C-105.37(a1) or by the State Board under G.S.115C-105.37(a), the superintendent shall take one of the following actions concerning the school's principal: (i) recommend to the local board that the principal be retained in the same position, (ii) recommend to the local board that the principal be retained in the same position and a plan of remediation should be developed, (iii) recommend to the local board that the

principal be transferred, or (iv) proceed under G.S. 115C-325.4 to dismiss or demote the principal.

The legislation intensifies the pressures on school leaders to make vast gains in student achievement quickly or face career altering consequences. The designation of RTPS as a low-performing district put all nine principals in jeopardy. In order to make swift gains, school leaders need to be equipped with the skills to lead organizations to improve.

With all of the demands on principals in Rocky Top Public Schools, there is little or no time allotted to develop leadership skills and support day to day decision making in ways that will cultivate profound improvement.

The legislation adds additional layers of responsibilities for the district and the schools identified as low performing. In addition to the decisions around personnel and the state required school improvement plan, a low performing district improvement plan outlining improvement efforts is required for each low performing school and for the district. The evaluation process in low performing schools has additional requirements for principals. Low performing schools must complete what is called a super evaluation for each teacher. The super evaluation requires a summative evaluation and a review of EVAAS data with teachers each time they are observed (N.C.G.S. 115C-105.39A). In failing schools and schools with new principals, on the job training has never been more important (James Ward, 2011).

In the fall of the first year for our current superintendent, five of the nine schools in Hickory Public School (RTPS) were identified by the state as Low Performing. RTPS was designated low performing in 2015-2016 because the majority of the schools were identified low performing, putting additional pressure on schools and the superintendent

to make significant improvement on achievement measures. Under this legislation, principals are held accountable for summative tests scores and could face transfers or lose their job based on student performance. The current superintendent had significant decisions to make about the principals after just a few weeks on the job. Under N.C.G.S. 115C-105.37 he had to recommend actions to retain or replace the principals in the low performing schools.

History and Evidence of the Problem within the Local Context

Rocky Top Public Schools is a pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade public school system located in the foothills of North Carolina. Rocky Top Public Schools is in Catawba County which is also served by two other school systems. Rocky Top became a major manufacturing area after World War II, primarily producing furniture and hosiery (Rocky Top. Well Crafted, 2017). When manufacturing was strong, students were encouraged to drop out of high school and work at the local factories. People were able to earn a livable wage in the factories and afford a productive and satisfying life. This is no longer possible. In the late 1990s, furniture and hosiery jobs began moving overseas. The loss of furniture jobs combined with the economic decline in 2008 created a weak economy and high unemployment. With few available jobs in the area, people are more likely to move away from Rocky Top as opposed to move to Rocky Top. The economy poses an additional challenge for Rocky Top Public Schools to recruit principals and teachers. In fall of 2015, one of Rocky Top's largest employers from Rocky Top to a larger metropolitan area an hour and a half away, which means additional loss of jobs and loss of significant tax revenue for the city.

Rocky Top Public Schools is unique in that it is one of three school systems in one county. RTPS has nine schools with 325 teachers that serve just over 4,000 students. The district is diverse racially, economically, and linguistically. Because of the small and intimate size of the district, personnel decisions have a great impact on the district morale and motivation. All schools except Rocky Ridge High are identified as Title I because of the high numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Like many districts in North Carolina, Rocky Top Public Schools is focused on the recruitment of a strong teaching force.

The state average turnover during the 2014-2015 school year was 14.84%, according to the 2014-2015 State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina Report to the General Assembly (2015). With a 21.4% turnover rate during the 2014-2015 school year, Rocky Top Public Schools has the twelfth highest turnover rate in the state (p.12). The high turnover results in the need to hire many new teachers each year. Enrollment in North Carolina education programs dropped 27% from 2010 to 2014 (Ovaska-Few, 2015). This drop in enrollment reduces the number of qualified candidates. Many of the factors that contributed to the decline in enrollment are out of the control of the district. The decline in interest in the education field is impacted by policy changes in North Carolina, including loss of pay for master's degrees and one of the nation's lowest pay scales. Hickory has additional challenges in recruiting as a result of the depressed local economy and high unemployment rate.

Low performing status is also a barrier to recruitment. Low performing schools are associated with areas in poverty. Schools in poverty face additional challenges attracting and retaining highly qualified and effective principals and teachers (Clotfelter,

Glennie, Ladd & Vigdor, 2008). With added pressures to perform, and additional requirements added to the already overloaded job requirements, principals in low-performing schools and districts have a greater need for support than ever before. Since Rocky Top Public Schools has been identified as a low-performing district, and four out of nine principals new to a building in 2015-2016, it is critical to provide additional supports.

Rocky Top Public Schools hired a new superintendent for the 2015-2016 school year. This is the sixth superintendent in nine years. The superintendent for Rocky Top Public Schools was hired in October of the year of the study. A few weeks after he arrived, the district was identified as a low-performing district (N.C.G.S. 115C-105.37). This designation requires superintendents to make recommendations regarding school level leadership that can include retaining the principal, implementing an improvement plan for the principal, transfer the principal, or dismiss the principal. The designation created a unique challenge for new leadership, being hired under one set of expectations, and within weeks facing a vastly different reality. Low performing status was designated with no additional support, financial or otherwise to schools, principals, or superintendents.

Historical and current initiatives to address the problem.

Rocky Top Public Schools had very little principal churn between 1990 and 2012. Principals would typically serve in the post until retirement. As long-time principals have retired, they have been replaced with first year or novice principals. There has also been significant turnover at the high school level in the past five years. Both Rocky Ridge High School and Rocky Top Academy have had four different principals in five

years. Ray Weddel was the remaining long-term veteran for school year 2015-2016 with 26 years of experience in the role of principal. Weddel was a new principal in Rocky Top Public Schools in 1990. In an interview with Mr. Weddel, he revealed the types of support offered to him as a new principal. In 1990, a district administrator and former principal was assigned as his mentor. During the first year, she provided guidance, support, and acted as a “buddy” for the new principal. This was the last year Rocky Top Public Schools provided new principals a mentor.

Weddel reports that principals used to get together on their own to collaborate and plan. They were given permission to go off site together and work. Weddel shared that principals would all go to lunch after principals meetings to share. That practice changed about 10 years ago when the district began hosting all meetings and providing lunch. Weddel, who served 26 years as principal in Rocky Top Public Schools shared that, “We used to get together on our own, but the way things are now it is an issue of how do we take care of our own?” (R. Weddel, personal communication, January 28, 2015).

Rocky Top Public Schools currently has no policy or induction effort intended to address the needs of principals, nor are there meeting times for principals that are driven by the identified needs of the principal. There are opportunities each month for principals to meet, but the agendas are driven by the district office. Additional state level meetings are held for principals with content created at the state level (see Appendix B READY principals meeting agenda). While all of the meetings can support the work of the principal, the purpose of the meetings is driven from the perspective of district or state level leaders, and is not designed to provide individualized support for building level leaders.

Rocky Top Public Schools has contracted with external support for schools. Dr. Chance Lewis is the Carol Grotnes Belk Distinguished Full Professor of Urban Education in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He is also the founder of the Urban Education Collaborative, a group dedicated to improving Urban Education. In 2014 and 2015, professional development for principals in RTPS was delivered by Dr. Lewis to address achievement gaps, particularly between white male students and black male students. Principals participated in sessions with Dr. Lewis at the annual district retreats in the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2015. In addition to the support from Dr. Lewis at the retreat, RTPS holds monthly principals' meetings and monthly leveled meetings or data meetings. Even though support for principal leadership is particularly important with high-stakes accountability, there is no existing induction or mentoring program for new principals at this time (Drago-Severson, 2009). To address the problems around principal isolation and low morale, I propose to create a structured PLC authentically designed to address the specific need for principals to support one another through discussion, problem solving and brainstorming solutions to common issues.

Figure 1. Visual depiction of the improvement theory.



Figure 1. Visual depiction of improvement theory. The intervention is designed to continue leadership study begun during principal training. The collaborative and reflective nature of the professional learning community will result in positive outcomes in personal and organizational performance.

Survey data in support of the intervention.

In October of 2015, I was exploring the problem of limited principal support as part of my coursework. As my intervention was designed, I sought approval from the RTPS superintendent, Dr. Joe Caldwell. Dr. Caldwell and I met and reviewed the general goal of the project, to support new principals. As a former principal who understands the demands of the role, he agreed to allow the project to be implemented in Rocky Top Public Schools and supported the intent of the work. Once I had his approval, I then prepared a survey for all principals in Rocky Top Public Schools as part of a data

collection course (EDRS, 804). The survey (Appendix C) was administered between November 22 and November 30 of 2015. The information gleaned from the survey informed the direction of the intervention.

Eight of the nine principals in Rocky Top Public Schools completed the survey. All of the elementary principals participated, and all but one of the secondary principals participated. The eight item survey revealed information that informed the direction of my research. The data show we all feel that we have opportunities to participate in some type of professional activity, and the activities we participate in are designed by the state or district. Principal READY meetings are held twice each year for principals in each region of North Carolina. The READY meetings grew out of the Race to the Top initiative and originally supported principals using the evaluation instrument for teachers when the state adopted a new process. The meetings have evolved over time to address various topics including Analysis of Student Work and Educator Effectiveness. The READY meetings were referenced in multiple responses. In addition, three of the principals mentioned participation in a doctoral program as being their most meaningful professional growth experience.

Other responses included attendance at state level conferences as part of their professional development experiences. The state conferences include the Elementary Conference, Closing the Gap Conference, the Leadership Conference, and various regional conferences. While the leadership conference is aimed at executive leaders, the majority of the conferences listed were not designed specifically for school level leadership. In recent years, budgets have impacted individual's ability to attend as many

conferences, as attendance requires significant allocations from already tight school budgets.

As I reflected on this section of the survey, I keyed in on one particular response. One respondent described a professional learning experience, “The session was titled *Building Capacity for School Administrators*. However, the session was limited to survey data reflecting principal efficacy and problem resolution strategies. The basis of the session did not address developing overall leadership.” This statement led me to reflect on the content of what was shared. The content of the meetings listed is largely developed from outside sources, not based on differentiated need for the principals within the local context. While I see value in the state and regional meetings, I also hear within the response quoted above, a desire for more support within the local context.

The survey also asked Rocky Top Public Schools principals to share the frequency of communication with one another. The responses were quite varied with two reporting daily communication with other principals, and two stating only 2-3 times each month. One reported speaking with others once per week, while the remaining two communicate 2-3 times a week. As a new principal, I was surprised that there was this much communication happening, as I was receiving very few, if any calls or emails from colleagues. As I began to dig deeper, I noticed a correlation between the number of years’ experience and the frequency of communication. Those with the most experience, eleven or more years, reported communicating daily with other principals. I also noticed that both middle school principals reported speaking with other principals 2-3 times each week. The newest principals at the secondary and elementary level reported the fewest opportunities to communicate with other principals, 2-3 times per month.

The survey also seeks information regarding barriers to principal collaboration. Every respondent with the exception of one, noted time as the biggest barrier. In addition to the time, respondents noted the following barriers: geography, perceived competition, disconnect of focus to ensure shared outcomes and misperception of intent, opportunity, isolation, lack of district training, and unrealistic job expectations.

As a result of this survey, the first obstacle I knew we needed to address in order to design an effective intervention was time. The demands of the job require long hours at each school. The work needed to be meaningful enough to attract principals and at a time that was most likely to work for all involved. The survey also helped me to reflect on the concept of experience and how it impacts the goals of this project. I designed the intervention to support new principals in Rocky Top Public Schools in response to the initial survey and in cooperation with participants. Based on this data, I identified the need for support and connection is most prevalent for those with less experience. The intervention described in this study impacts those who need the most support, consistent with the findings from the initial survey.

Impact of the survey results on intervention design.

The initial survey of all principals in Rocky Top Public Schools validated the need to support principals new to their buildings. I considered interventions that would impact all nine of the principals in Rocky Top Public Schools, but as I reflected on the survey results, I concluded that the group may need to be targeted to support newer principals. As I thought about the research on principal churn and the impact on schools in poverty, I again concluded that the highest need in Rocky Top Public Schools is with the principals who are new to buildings. Implementing improvement science as a

framework, I solicited help in the form of a design team. At this point, I reached out to the three other new principals in Rocky Top Public Schools and asked if they would be interested in being a part of a design team to construct supports for principal development and support. All agreed to help. The next step in the process was to meet with the design team and solicit input on the goals of the intervention. The survey results clearly indicated time as the biggest barrier to collaboration. The first challenge was to find a time the design team could meet. An opportunity presented itself when superintendent Dr. Caldwell announced upon his arrival that all principals were to attend monthly board meetings. This directive left all of us at our schools from dismissal until the board meetings begin at 7 o'clock pm. The time between dismissal and the meetings left a window of opportunity. I invited the design team to meet with me from 4 pm to 6:30 pm at my school to review the project proposal and provide input and direction. I also invited the principal of the year to attend. Her experience at the elementary and secondary level would support her service to the group as a mentor principal. While all who were invited agreed to attend the first meeting to review the intervention goals, the principal from the magnet high school did not attend the design team meeting.

Meeting with the design team.

During the first meeting of the design group, the group spent time talking about the goal of our meetings. This is consistent with the aim of the first question of the improvement science model, which is what are we trying to accomplish? We discussed the purpose and goals of the intervention, examined the plan and timeline for implementation, and discussed the political implications of being a part of this group. I

shared the driver diagram (Appendix D), the problem definition (Appendix E) and talked through the overall intent of the intervention.

I shared the charter for the work that outlined the goal and intent of the intervention. The charter included a graphic depiction of the problem of practice (Appendix E). The problem was stated as principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale. As this graphic was shared, we talked through each part, and I asked for input to shape or revise the graphic. Each member agreed that the statement was accurate and honest from their perspective. The first part of our discussion of the problem statement resulted in very high emotions regarding the loss of time with family as a result of being a school principal. One of the group members was moved to tears discussing the loss of time with family and children due to the overwhelming number of hours required to be a principal. She even stated a strong feeling of loss for others in the group with small children and young families. This emotion expressed was both surprising in its candor and embraced by the group as honest.

Table 1

PLC Meeting Dates and Topics

The design team selected the following schedule and proposed meeting topics for discussion in PLC meetings.

PLC Meeting Dates	Proposed Topics
April 25, 2016	Summative Evaluation
May 23, 2016	Planning for Next Year/Hiring
June 27, 201	Improvement Planning and Data Reflection

During this first meeting, all members of the group expressed a strong desire for emotional support. The group agreed the problem statement accurately depicted the challenges to be addressed. Once again, a surprising discussion happened when examining the impact of low morale and isolation. I had included the words lack of trust to describe one of the results of low morale and isolation, but had removed it prior to meeting with the group, fearing it would be viewed as negative. To my surprise, the group requested to add trust to the graphic. Our mentor described the addition of the word this way, “I advise my teachers all the time to talk about real issues in order to address them.” She advised our group to do the same. We all agreed, and as a result, trust was added to the design team’s problem definition graphic (Appendix E).

The discussion touched on the pressures associated with the job and district walkthroughs, preparation of plans for improvement, and additional tasks for low-performing schools, there were moments of hope as well. Mrs. Starnes shared that she overheard her assistant principal tell a newly hired staff member that she was “hired not for what she was today, but for what she would be in the future.” Mrs. Starnes expressed that she would like others to have that same confidence in her.

The meeting was adjourned only because the group had to depart for the board meeting. Our first discussion was nearly three hours in length and could have continued. Each design member expressed interest in participating in more meetings to support one another and dates were set. Key takeaways from a design perspective included the idea of the importance of emotional support for the demands of the job, and importance of trust within the group and between the schools and district. Improvement Science directs the use of a team to design interventions. The team has varied experience and perspectives

that enhance the design of the intervention. The input from the group validated the direction of the intervention and enhanced the problem definition. In addition, I had strong buy-in from the participants as a result of the experience.

Theoretical Considerations

Bolman and Deal (2008) provide insights regarding historical gaps in support for principals in Rocky Top Public Schools. Examining isolation and morale through the lenses of Bolman and Deal (2008) provides frameworks to consider as solutions are designed. Given that principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale, there are multiple specific interventions needed to address the issue. Bolman and Deal (2008) have identified lenses through which to view problems within organizations. The structural, symbolic, political, and human resource lenses, when applied to the problem of principal isolation and morale, provide guidance regarding the selection of appropriate interventions.

One of the barriers to principal collaboration in Rocky Top Public Schools is the lack of time and opportunity. When viewing the problem of principal isolation and morale through the structural frame, current structures do not provide adequate or a true opportunity for discussions driven by the needs identified for principals by principals. Principal experience alone is insufficient for school improvement. Having time to reflect on experience collaboratively matters and structures need to be created to facilitate that type of reflective culture (Garmston & VonFrank, 2012). To address the lack of structures, an effective process needs to provide a structured time to meet. When our superintendent was hired in the fall of 2015, he required all principals to attend monthly school board meetings. Since the meetings begin at 7 pm, that leaves time in the

afternoon for principals to meet once per month prior to the board meetings. One structure that supports this type of collaboration is the professional learning community. The structure for the meetings allows principals to collaborate and reflect on topics of interest .

When viewing the problems of principal isolation and morale through the symbolic lens (Bolman and Deal, 2008), the formation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) serves a critical purpose. Symbolically, the formation of the professional learning community represents a grass-roots effort for principals to gain a voice and claim their power within the organization. Forming the PLC with the support of the district also serves as a symbolic message of support for the work and opinions of the principals. As noted previously, the lack of supports for principals in the literature suggests principal support is difficult or perhaps not valued. When organized with support from the district, the formation of intentional support for principals can bring cohesion between the two levels within the organization and demonstrate a commitment and appreciation for the need to support principals.

The political lens of Bolman and Deal (2008) has application as well. The political power of a group of collegial principals will improve and create collective voice within the organization to advocate for professional growth opportunities. The physical isolation of the position can leave principals feeling as if there are few places to seek support. Politically, to seek common solutions and understanding with colleagues over time will reduce the feelings of isolation as principals will feel part of a group and empowered to support one another.

From a human resources lens, such a group of principals will build collegiality; create a sense of being part of a group, and increase retention of principals. The empowerment of the group will combat the feelings of isolation principals describe. A principal PLC will reduce the competition created due to the pressures of accountability. Bolman and Deal (2008) provide a useful framework through which to view the problem of principal isolation and morale. When analyzed from the perspective of the four frames, appropriate interventions were selected to address the specific barriers preventing principal support and development.

Addressing Principal Morale and Isolation

In order to provide additional support for principals, adding support personnel was considered. There are documented benefits from the use of an experienced mentor (Bryant, King, and Wilson, 2016; Daresh, 2007; Felicello, 2015). Hiring a district mentor for principals was considered. However, it was not feasible to consider the addition of positions with current budget constraints. Therefore, that idea was rejected. For low performing schools, external leadership development has been effective to improve efficacy and support student achievement (Airola, Bengston, Davis, & Peer, 2014). The use of external consultants for leadership development was considered. This intervention was rejected because of budget constraints and because of the difficulty finding external support specifically for principals. The most feasible intervention considered was the creation of a structured Professional Learning Community for the RTPS principals with a peer mentoring component. Principals selected for participation in the PLC are those new to buildings in RTPS during the 2015-2016 school year.

The PLC group has one experienced principal to serve in a mentoring capacity. The group of new principals and mentor principal comprise the design team as described

in Table 2. The same group participated in the design of the intervention by volunteering to be part of the design team. Design team input shaped the creation of the intervention. As Richard Elmore (2004) notes, successful school reform grows from the inside-out. This intervention is reflective of this idea as the principals determine the content and direction of the group. Discussions resulted in a visual depiction of the problem and contributing factors from the perspective of the design team (see Appendix E for problem definition by design team). The team also created initial goals for the PLC using the SMART goal model for implementation (Appendix F).

The selected intervention, the creation of a PLC, will complement and enhance the work of principals as opposed to adding another layer of responsibility or requiring additional resources. The role of the principal has changed radically (Chitpin, 2014; Daresh, 2007; Hancock, Black, & Bird, 2006; James-Ward, 2011). Therefore, the selected intervention is designed in a way that can address the challenges of modern educational leaders and institutions and work within existing constraints.

PLCs and mentoring will address isolation, improve morale, and meet the immediate need for support. The intervention targets Principals new to school buildings in Rocky Top Public Schools and utilizes the protocols from Critical Friends (National School Reform Faculty, 2014), a specific structure for PLCs. During the PLC meetings, the group establishes norms for collaboration, identifies individual and collective needs for the group, and authentically and collaboratively creates agendas based on principal interests and needs. The agendas for the meetings are fluid and guided by the self-identified needs of the principals (see Appendix G for PLC meeting agenda from April 25, 2016). Having flexibility with the design of the meetings allows for adjustments

during the improvement cycle, consistent with the Model for Improvement outlined by Langley et al. (2009). The use of the Critical Friends protocol will provide the PLC meeting with a formalized structure to guide conversations and avoid the potential for focusing on the issue of low morale or perseverate on any other individual issue.

The benefits of PLCs are well documented (DuFour & Eaker, 2005; DuFour, 2012; Thessin, 2015). However, the application of PLC structure varies widely, and the term PLC is used and often inappropriately attached to a variety of meetings. Dufour's (2014) PLC model focuses on the adult as learner and action researcher who investigates practices and uses data to determine instructional adjustments. This PLC will adapt the DuFour model, using the four questions. Since principals serve different levels, the questions will be used to support collective examination of data and problem solving. It is important to note that several terms are used interchangeably with PLC. Communities of practice are found closely linked with PLCs in the literature. Both communities of practice and PLCs are interactive and collegial. However, there are significant distinctions which will be addressed in the findings section.

Implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) is supported by Drago-Severson's (2009) adult learning theories to build developmental leadership through the creation of mentoring communities where educators support and challenge one another for continued growth. Professional learning communities hold potential to address the highly contextual and changing educational landscape and leverage the social nature of learning, supporting collective inquiry of the many challenges school leaders face (Dufour, DuFour, & Eaker 2009). The interactive nature of PLC meetings allows peers to view their settings through the eyes of others, and learn from and with each other

(Bengtson, Airola, Peer, & Davis, 2012). Combating the problem of isolation, the use of PLCs as an intervention will provide a structure and opportunity for building level leaders to be reflective and collaborative (Chitpin, 2014).

The continual focus on adults as learners results in improved student outcomes (DuFour, 2007; Guskey, 1999; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). The design for the interventions will adapt the Dufour model, but use more precise protocols to drive the discussion around topics specific to building level leaders. While the DuFour model has been highly successful for many schools, the principal PLC will need additional structures to focus the work to take advantage of the limited amount of time available to meet. Critical Friends is a specific type of protocol for PLCs that uses guiding questions to encourage deep reflection and group exploration of topics (National School Reform Faculty, 2014). The idea of a critical friend is that they will help you grow by asking probing questions, encouraging creative problem solving, support risk taking, and celebrate successes. The content of the discussions will be driven by the needs of the group which also supports investment and buy in from members.

Research Literature Support for Professional Learning Community for Principals

The isolated nature of the principal position is a barrier to continued professional growth (Ponomareva, 2015). Learning is a social activity, requiring interaction with others (Wegner, 2007). As a school principal, this is difficult to accomplish since the majority of social interactions during the school day are focused around the support and cultivation of the school's teachers, students, and larger school community. Fullen (2008) said, "For change to occur, peer interaction in the problem solving process is required." To fully engage in problem solving, principals must be afforded opportunities

to interact with peers. Emphasis should be placed on job-embedded learning through reflective practice and peer interactions (Bengston, 2012). Interactions between principals will not happen without intentional planning and strong commitment from all stakeholders. If organizations are seeking improvement and sustainable change, peer interaction as part of the problem solving process is critical, whether within the organization or between peer organizations (Fullen, 2008).

Mentoring is an added component to the PLC. The group membership includes an experienced principal to function in the role of mentor. Mentoring has been shown to improve instructional leadership skills of principals (Daresh, 2007). In addition, studies show principal mentoring programs have a positive impact on the morale of novice principals (Felicello, 2015). With a clear gap in the sustained and job-embedded supports for principals, PLCs provide a place for principals to reflect, discuss, experiment, practice, and learn from one another, which principals desire (Chitpin, 2014). On the job support and training is more important than ever before, especially in low-performing schools (James-Ward, 2011). Applying the DuFour model for PLCs, the meetings will be focused on individual school data, examining common data points shared by schools. The structure of a PLC will address the challenges of isolation and provide a place for reflection and collective problem solving, so desperately needed for principals.

Rationale for Selecting Professional Learning Community for Principals

With increasing accountability and demands on school leadership, districts will be faced with challenges related to recruitment and retention, especially in high need schools (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). Research shows that the role of the school principal is second only to the role of the teacher in impacting student achievement

(Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson & Orr, 2007; James-Ward, 2011; Osborne-Lampkin, Folsom, & Herrington, 2015; School Leaders Network, 2012; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Tornson, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to support existing principals with additional interventions and professional growth opportunities to minimize impacts of principal churn and support student achievement.

The high turnover rate of principals is a concern for districts. Rocky Top Public Schools had four principals new to their buildings during the year of the study. Principals engaged in a meaningful peer network for support remain in the same school at a rate of 98% compared to 58% not participating in some sort of peer networking (The Leaders Network, 2014). Peer networks for support are a successful job embedded strategy to combat the isolation of the principalship and high turnover rate. With the time invested in the day to day demands of the job, principals rarely have time to invest in themselves as professionals. Often, principals spend time investing in their staff, but rarely take the time to cultivate their own skills. The initial training to become licensed as a principal is important, but practicing principals have much to learn, especially during the first years on the job. Principals have a need to engage in dialogue about the complex nature of their work in a safe environment (Drago-Severson, 2009). Unfortunately, most professionals in schools and systems do not have the benefit of time with a “critically thoughtful observer” to reflect with on their practice (Drago Severson, 2009). The development of a community of learners through a PLC to collaboratively plan, explore, and reflect on the many decisions made by school leadership will strengthen the organizational outcomes.

PLCs have been shown to improve confidence of participants to make true cultural change within organizations. (Neale & Cole, 2013). Principals routinely institute

the PLC structure within schools to address the professional growth of teachers. PLCs have been described as the tie that binds adults who work in schools (Cranston, 2008). If PLCs are able to create community with teachers within a building, they should support a community of practicing principals. This community will combat the feelings of isolation that result from being a school principal.

Social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1971) suggests that learning takes place in a social context. Organizations and systems leaders have to move from operating in isolation to sharing problem solving through dialogue and collaborative learning that is only possible in collaborative communities (Airola, Bengtson, Davis & Peer, 2014). Because of the isolating nature of the position of principal, and the demands on the time of the principal, few opportunities exist for communities of learners to work together to develop leadership skills. In order to address complex issues, organizations need to shift from working in isolation to engaging in meaningful joint learning ventures with dialogue and discussion focused on issues within the laboratory of practice. (Bengtson, 2012).

Participation in a PLC is a social exercise. However, because this is a PLC for practitioners who are seeking solutions to problems within their context, I believe it will be important to implement a structure for the conversations within the PLC meetings. Creating a principal PLC, which has been suggested to hold the best promise for sustained school improvement, will address the feelings associated with the isolation of the job. However, efforts associated with PLCs will not produce results if lacking a structured purpose and process to encourage growth and reflection (Ponomareva, 2015). The structure selected should be flexible enough to allow for content derived from the group, but enough of a structured protocol that the time is productively spent. In order to

provide specific structure to the PLC meetings, the Critical Friends framework will be applied to meetings. (Appendix H includes the Critical Friends protocol used for the March 21, 2016 PLC meeting). Critical Friends use collaboration and structured interactions to improve professional practice (National School Reform Faculty, 2014). Protocols for discussing professional dilemmas will be implemented during each monthly PLC meetings.

Contextual Framework for the Intervention

While principal preparation is important, the training is insufficient to address the many demands of the job (James-Ward, 2011; Mitgang & Maeroff, 2008; Neale & Cole, 2013; School Leaders Network, 2014). Much of what has to be learned is specific to the context of the school and district. To address the principal isolation and low morale, job embedded collaboration and support is necessary to improve personal performance and achieve the goals of the organization.

Principals suffer from low morale and isolation and need immediate support. The implementation of a principal PLC as described in this section of the paper addresses the need for collaboration and collective problem solving with other principals. The research outlined strong support for the potential of PLCs to have lasting impact on school improvement. The local context supports the case outlining the need for additional principal support and potential for successful implementation of principal PLCs. The design team has shown dedication to the improvement project through their input on the problem definition, input on agendas, and attendance at design team meetings (Appendix E and F). The use of a PLC is consistent with Bandurra's social cognitive learning theory (1971), providing learning within a social context.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The intervention selected is part of the improvement effort guided by the Improvement Science framework. Improvement Science is a continuous improvement process that is action oriented and designed to improve systems by implementing changes and measuring their impact using the plan-do-study-act cycle. The use of balanced measures will determine if the innovation applied resulted in an improvement within the system. Effective improvement efforts involve a team of experts who work to improve a part of a larger system (Langley, 2009.) Effective teams include members representing three different kinds of expertise within the organization: system leadership, technical expertise, and day-to-day leadership. The team assembled for this initiative is called the design team as they provided input during the design phase and participated in the improvement cycle. Data collection during the PDSA cycle determines the impact of the innovation. This process was utilized as a framework for the creation and implementation of the intervention and analysis of data.

Analytic Autoethnography

The assessment of the effectiveness of the principal PLC utilizes analytic autoethnography, relying primarily on qualitative data from field notes, interviews, and journal reflections. Analytic autoethnography refers to research in which, “the researcher is a full member of the group, visible in published text, and committed to a theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena,” (Anderson, 2006, p. 373). Auto-ethnographic research design is a subset of analytic ethnography and has five key characteristics as described by Anderson (2006): complete member researcher (CMR), analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, dialogue with participants

beyond self, and commitment to theoretical analysis. Evocative autoethnography, a related method, is similar in that they both rely on CMR, but evocative autoethnography typically involves a focus on emotional topics such as death, illness, or divorce. Analytic autoethnography is appropriate when the purpose of a study is to gain insight into a broader set of social phenomena than the raw data provides. Autoethnography provides a methodology of action research to analyze one's own and other's behaviors within the context where they work (Acosta, Goltz, & Goodson, 2015). Anderson (2006) contends the goal of analytic autoethnography is not to create undebatable conclusions, but to contribute to "a spiraling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding," (p. 388).

Analytic autoethnography has advantages and limitations as an applied method. First, there are few opportunities when application of the method is appropriate. As a full participant in the applied intervention, the method is applicable, as I will be a full member of the group. An advantage in this role is the unique perspective and insight afforded a full member of the PLC. I will have an insider's perspective with access to data not shared with those outside of the group. The application of analytic autoethnography supports self-understanding of the CMR as data are collected and analyzed, as well as a deeper understanding of the impact of the intervention. Within the practitioner's setting, autoethnography informs practice, identity and culture (Acosta, Goltz, & Goodson, 2015).

This method does have potential limitations in its application. First, it can be very difficult to attempt to collect data as a full member of a group. Not only does it require great skill in balancing data collection and participation during meetings, but the

researcher has to carefully monitor their own participation as a significant influence on the group culture. This is of particular importance with the CMR facilitating the group experience in this study. Additionally, emotional investment could limit the objectivity of data evaluation.

Autoethnography poses challenges to the researcher (Anderson, 2006). While the advantage of being a participant researcher is that social phenomena are experienced along with study participants, group membership alone does not guarantee full understanding of the beliefs of all members as group beliefs are not always uniform. Other limitations include the fact that the district is small and there could be fear that confidence will be broken and trust compromised in reporting outcomes of the study. As a result, the plan for use of information needs to be highly transparent and frequently communicated.

Five principals agreed to participate in the intervention. The small number of participants is not a limitation in and of itself. The power of qualitative research is in the strength of the descriptions and interpretations (Maxwell, 2008). One participant attended the design team meeting and the second PLC meeting, but did not continue participation after the second PLC meeting. Pre and post PLC meeting surveys were completed by all who attended the three PLC meetings, but one participant who arrived late did not complete the pre-meeting survey. Significant others for each principal completed a survey designed as a balancing measure. The survey asked them questions regarding the role of principal from the perspective of those who care about the principal outside of the school context.

Design Team Members

A design team was formed to support the development of an intervention to address principal morale and isolation. The Improvement Science framework leverages those with knowledge of the topic to create a team (Park & Takahashi, 2013). This team contributes to the creation and development of the intervention. Table 2 describes design team members and provides contextual information about each principal and their corresponding school, including the North Carolina school report card grade from the 2014-2015 school year. The table also identifies the role of each principal as participant, member or scholar-practitioner. The design team that had input in the design of the intervention agreed to participate in the PLC. PLC participants are volunteers within the organization who are new to buildings as principals in RTPS during 2015-2016. An additional participant is an experienced principal who serves as the mentor in the group.

The intervention will focus on the specific needs of practicing principals. The group of principals forming the Professional Learning Community (PLC) will focus efforts around problems in their practice within the context of Rocky Top Public Schools. The participants in this professional learning community come from the schools in RTPS that have new principals for 2015-2016 and the Principal of the Year for Rocky Top Public Schools from 2014-2015. The Principal of the Year is from a middle school, grades 6-8, that received the National Schools to Watch recognition in 2014-2015 and has won numerous art awards. The school has multiple accolades, but was identified by the state as a Focus School due to the significant gap in the performance of white and non-white students. Her school received a C on the NC School Report Card from 2014-2015 and is a Title 1 school.

There are two middle schools in Hickory. The principal at the other middle school is also participating in the PLC. He is beginning his second year in the role, but his first as principal at this particular school in RTPS. He was an assistant at the school before leaving for one year for his first principalship in another county. The principal replaces a veteran principal who served the school for many years and was a fixture in the community. The school received a D on the NC School Report card from 2014-2015, has been identified as low performing, and is a Title 1 school.

The two high school principals are also participating in the PLC. Our traditional high school has a new principal who has experience in other districts and a year and a half as principal at another school in RTPS. He is the fourth principal at the high school in six years. This school has a history of excellence in athletics and academics, but has struggled with achievement in recent years. This school is experiencing a larger than state average teacher turnover rate, especially in science and math.

The magnet high school's principal served the traditional high school as an assistant principal before taking the helm at the magnet for the 2015-2016 school year. This school houses an alternative school and has higher than state average teacher turnover rate. This school received a D on the 2014-2015 NC State Report Cards and is identified as low performing.

This is my first year as a Principal at Slate Elementary. I have no prior experience as an assistant principal, but fulfilled my administrative internship at the same school, which required 600 hours of field experience. The previous principal who supervised my internship is now the principal at the traditional high school and a PLC participant. My school received a B on the NC School Report Card in 2014-2015. Slate

Elementary is identified as Title 1 with over 55% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. In a period of five years, this school has had five principals.

Table 2

Design Team Members

Team Members	School Context
Jonathan West Participant	Rocky Ridge High School the district's traditional High School Churn: 4 principals in past 6 years. First year as RRHS principal. School report card grade of C
Christine Lee Participant	Hickory Career and Arts Magnet School Houses a magnet program and an alternative school. Churn: 3 principals in last 4 years. Title 1 school First year of a new principal. She has experience as an assistant principal, but no principal experience. School report card grade of D
Carson Johnson Participant	Mountain Peak Middle School houses grades 6-8. Churn: He replaced a long-time community icon who was principal for many years. Title 1 School New principal with one year experience in another county. School report card grade of D.
Bethany Starnes Mentor	The veteran principal of Blue Ridge Middle has been at this 6-8 school for 3years. The school is a <i>National Schools to Watch</i> NC Focus School for the disparities in achievement for whites and non-whites. Title 1 School School report card grade of C
Jennifer Griffin Scholar/Practitioner	Slate Elementary is a PK-5 school. Churn: 5 principals in 5 years. Title 1 School The principal has had no previous experience as a principal or assistant principal. School report card grade of B is the highest in the district.

Determining the Impact of the Intervention

To ensure an accurate description of the intervention process, I collected multiple types of data including: field notes from PLC meetings, reflective journals, survey data from the PLC meeting participants, interviews of PLC participants, and pre and post meeting survey data. See table 4 for a summary of the data collected in the study. As suggested by Improvement Science scholars, I did not focus narrowly on outcome measures, but intentionally collected process and balancing measures as well. Balancing measures are intended to ensure that improvement in one area of an organization does not negatively impact other areas. Balancing measures included surveys of assistant principals and significant others and attendance at monthly district meetings. Process measures defined as measures that examine the underlying processes that support a system tracked attendance and participation.

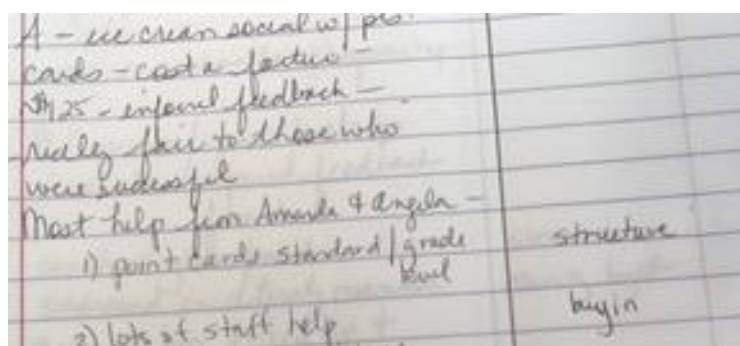
Table 3

Plan for summative assessment of intervention

PLC Meeting Dates	Data Collected
February 22, 2016 Design Team Meeting	Field notes collected Attendance recorded Problem definition reviewed and edited
April 25, 2016 First PLC Meeting	Field notes collected Attendance recorded Survey of isolation and moral at beginning and end of meeting Reflective journal
April-May 2016	Initial surveys of AP/lead teacher
May 23, 2016 Second PLC Meeting	Field notes collected Attendance recorded Survey of isolation and moral at beginning and end of meeting Reflective journal
June 27, 2016	Field notes collected

Third PLC Meeting	Attendance recorded Survey of isolation and moral at beginning and end of meeting Reflective journal
June 2016	Concluding interviews for each participant Final survey of AP/lead teacher Survey of significant others
October 24, 2016 Fourth PLC Meeting	Field notes collected Attendance recorded
November 28, 2016 Fifth PLC Meeting	Field notes collected Attendance recorded Collaborative summary statement

Figure 3 Field Notes from the Second PLC Meeting, May 23, 2016



Field notes and journaling.

Field notes were collected during each PLC meeting. The field notes recorded both descriptive and reflective information. While recording field notes, I made note of responses of participants, individual and group reactions, group dynamics and interactions, and recorded direct quotations. The field notes were analyzed and coded, applying inductive coding methods. After each PLC meeting, I would review field notes and record a written journal in response to the experience.

Interviews.

Interviews of the PLC participants took place at the beginning and end of the improvement cycle. This improvement project is the first time principals in Rocky Top Public Schools have had an organized and structured support that is focused on principal identified need. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to ascertain information about the central components of the improvement efforts, but add more open ended options for additional feedback and opportunities for general viewpoints and suggestions. The three main sections of questioning address principal morale, feelings of efficacy, and the impact of affective supports within the PLC group. Data collected in the interviews was analyzed through inductive coding, but four deductive codes were applied examining data for the role of the principal, isolation, support, and morale.

Survey data.

In addition to the interviews, field notes, and journaling, survey data were collected from PLC participants and from significant others and assistant principals. Survey data were collected at the beginning and end of each PLC meeting to measure the impact of the intervention on the group. The pre meeting and post meeting surveys (Appendix I) consisted of nine items. Two items were date and time to record the chronology of the data. Seven items used a zero to ten Likert-type scale to measure participant responses. The survey was delivered via email to each participant and timed to arrive at the beginning and end of the meeting. The questions were designed to gage the impact on isolation, morale, and efficacy.

As a balancing measure, assistant principals completed surveys about their principal at the beginning of the intervention and at the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

These surveys featured seven items that measured the assistant's principal's perception of the work of their principal. The questions are specific to the concept of support, morale, and the role of the principal. The survey helped determine if the introduction of a principal PLC has unintended consequences at the school level.

Analysis of Data

In order to protect participants and encourage participation, data were securely housed and parameters clearly defined so that participants did not feel threatened by the data, as the data have the potential for current and future negative implications. The establishment of ground rules and transparency regarding reporting from the researcher was necessary to establish participation and trust from participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process (Appendix J) requires informed consent for participation by each member of the PLC. The IRB process outlines the use of the information and methods of communicating results.

The field notes, journals, and interviews were analyzed using inductive and deductive coding. Deductive codes of role of the principal, isolation, support, and morale will be applied to all of the data collected, closely aligning data analysis with the goal of the intervention. With a participant researcher, deductive codes may be too prescriptive or limit the voice of the larger group (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Use of inductive coding for trends in interviews, surveys, and scholar practitioner field notes will analyze data and look for intervention impact outside of the two focus areas (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Inductive coding is chosen as the method of analysis as it allows the group dynamics to emerge as well. The deductive codes were selected to closely relate to the problem of practice and the desired areas of impact. The deductive

coding looked specifically for information regarding the role (of principal), isolation, morale, and support. Once the initial data were coded, the codes for support and role were observed at a high frequency and therefore, investigated further. The codes for support were analyzed to see if there were similarities regarding the type of support principals seek, and the codes for role were examined to see if the interview data was consistent with the research literature.

Current support for principals in Rocky Top Public Schools includes the attendance at monthly meetings, and monthly leveled meetings. These meetings continued as balancing measures. Surveys for assistant principals and significant others were intended as balancing measures during the intervention. The IRB process utilized with the PLC members was followed with the assistant principals and significant others as well. The balancing measures looked holistically to see if the selected intervention had an impact on the larger system. To collect this data, colleagues and significant others with daily contact with principals completed surveys. The surveys were delivered electronically via email. A link to the survey was embedded in the email. All six participants included in the assistant principal survey completed the initial survey. Three of the six completed the final survey. All five significant others completed the survey.

One data measure was rejected for inclusion in the research. Survey data collected from significant others, designed as a balancing measure was excluded from the findings. Review of the data revealed too much personal information to allow it to be used in alignment with confidentiality offered in the consent forms.

Procedures for Data Collection

The intervention cycle featured three PLC meetings that were scheduled to coincide with the monthly school board meetings. The meeting dates and times were shared early to encourage principals to plan to attend (see Table 1). The agendas were created with input from the participants as part of the initial design team work. I selected corresponding Critical Friends protocols (Appendix H) and created agendas. Group norms were established to guide each meeting. To reinforce the norms agreed upon by the group, they were placed on each agenda (Appendix G). Emails with the surveys were sent using the timed delivery feature to schedule their arrival for the specific meeting and ending times. Each PLC meeting started with the completion of the survey and each PLC meeting ended with completion of the survey. In between the surveys, the Critical Friends protocols were followed. I facilitated each meeting, taking field notes while participating.

The interviews were scheduled after the first PLC meeting and again after the third PLC meeting (Appendix K contains initial interview questions and Appendix L lists final interview questions). Each interview was recorded and transcribed by a service before being coded using deductive and inductive coding.

The data collected include process data such as attendance and meeting agendas. The data will support analysis of the impact of the intervention. (see Table 3 for data collection summary). The continual analysis of data allowed adjustments to be made to the PLC structure throughout the improvement cycle, consistent with Improvement Science. While the aim of the PLC is to decrease isolation and increase morale, the data collection techniques, analytic autoethnography, will allow the development of theory

about the impact of professional learning community on morale and feelings of isolation. As a participant researcher, field notes provide insights into group dynamics, discussion and progress over time. Changes in perception and group dynamics over time will be monitored and recorded in reflections, interviews, and field notes.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

There is ample evidence that professional learning communities can be effective structures for improvement efforts of teachers. The intent of this intervention was to create a principal professional learning community. A PLC was created as an intervention to provide immediate support for principals and minimize isolation and low morale. During the improvement cycle, principals participated in a PLC designed as a vehicle for collaboration and collective problem solving and reflection on school level data. The Critical Friends protocols utilized during the PLC meetings provided a structure and direction for the work. Analytic autoethnographic methods were employed to collect data. Surveys of participants and interviews provided additional data. Data were coded and analyzed for trends and impact of the intervention specifically on morale and isolation. Evaluation of the intervention will determine if results can be generalized or if the intervention should be continued, expanded to include all principals, or abandoned.

The First Professional Learning Community Meeting

On April 25, 2016, our first principal Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting was held prior to a board meeting, from 5 pm to 6:45 pm. During the meeting, I was both a participant, and a researcher, taking field notes and facilitating. The meeting included all but one of those invited. Mrs. Lee had a personal conflict and could not attend. When one of the principals arrived, he stated he had not eaten yet that day, even though it was 5 pm. I had candy available and he ate an Almond Joy. I provided water, snacks, and offered to order dinner for the participants at each meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting, a survey was administered. The survey was sent via email and timed to arrive at 5 pm. The email embedded the link to the nine item survey. Two items asked the date and time, with the remaining seven items using a Likert-type scale of zero to 10 to answer questions.

Before we began the meeting, there was a lengthy discussion of the IRB process (Appendix J) and use of the data collected at the meetings. The group had specific concerns about the use and publication of the data. I agreed that data would be shared with the group as collected, and that I would respect any requests for privacy in respect to field notes or minutes from the meetings. The group requested the use of pseudonyms in the publication, which I honored. This discussion recurred at several points during the PLC meeting.

After the initial survey was complete, the meeting began with a round robin opener from the Critical Friends called Check-In Circle (National School Reform Faculty, 2014). The check in circle is designed as a transitional component of the meeting. The questions used support focus on the goals of the meeting and transition from life outside of the group. This check in circle directs participants to share one good thing and one bad thing from the day. As we shared around the table, one principal stated a good thing is she is forcing herself to say work can wait, and making an effort to take time for running or a hobby. The bad thing is she feels very overwhelmed and ineffective. Another agreed and then immediately admitted guilt for feeling that way. As a novice principal, I asked the more experienced mentor if that feeling ever goes away. She said, "I feel I still can't get to what I think is truly important." Mr. Johnson shared that he had received over 11,000 emails since July 1. At that point we were interrupted by the

incessant vibrating of Mr. West's phone, indicating incoming emails. When we all turned our attention his way, he replied, "There was a time when principals didn't have to deal with that. People had their weekends." I found the literature echoed this idea of the role of the principal changing, continually referring to the changed nature of the role many times. Until that moment, I had attributed the change to the increased accountability pressures, and focus on instructional leadership. As Mr. West illustrated, technology makes us even more accessible, increasing the speed and pace of each day, even on the weekends and evenings.

We then launched into the Critical Friends protocol selected for the bulk of this meeting. This protocol is Constructivist Protocol for Adult Work (National School Reform Faculty, 2014). The purpose of this protocol is to gain a deeper understanding of how we do our best work. The premise supports a heightened awareness, so participants can provide what is needed more often for teachers to do their best work. For this activity, the group spent several minutes engaged in individual writing, responding to the following from the Critical Friends (2014).

Write about a time you did your very best work, a time you really "nailed it."

Describe the work. Use the following guiding questions to fully describe your work:

What was it that you did?

Why were you doing it?

Did you have support? What did that support look like?

Did you work alone or with other people?

Was this work hard? Risky? Safe?

What motivated you?

How did you know your work was good? What were the qualities of your work?
Did you know you “nailed it” immediately or did that knowledge come to you
later?

This exercise is called a quick write, and allows participants to quickly gather thoughts prior to a discussion. The participants completed the quick writing task, and the discussion that followed generated a list of conditions that are necessary for us to be successful. They included buy in through structured choice, encouragement, feedback, transparency, and clear communication. Mr. West stated that “feedback at all levels validates what you are doing.”

This idea of feedback appeared both in the opening check in circle and in the discussion of the writing task. The group expressed a desire for feedback. One principal shared his experience of asking for feedback from the superintendent. He said he later second guessed his choice, even though the feedback was positive. That need for validation was reflected in Mr. West’s response that, “I want them to know I am trying.”

The PLC meeting concluded after principals acknowledged the parallels between what they need to be successful, and what their teachers need. Mrs. Starnes shared her School Improvement Team process and several examples of transparency and communication with teachers who serve on the team. She talked about the Schools to Watch process and the buy in from staff. She accredited the high level of commitment to the process of applying for Schools to Watch to the fact it was a school decision to apply, and it was not mandated. She shared that having the choice to participate made her teachers feel their opinion was valued. The process resulted in constructive feedback for the school, which was used to create collective goals based on the standards from Schools

to Watch. Feedback was well-received as a result of the high level of buy in created through the process of implementation.

Engagement during the PLC meeting was high and the conversation flowed easily with few probing questions necessary for the conversation to continue. Participants seemed to enjoy both sharing experiences and listening to others. The conversation would have continued, but we had to attend the board meeting. The principals completed the post PLC meeting survey before leaving.

Upon reflection, I felt quite proud of the experience together during that first PLC meeting. I left feeling positive and as if we had the chance to learn and reflect together. The next morning, my husband saw one of them at the gym. They made a point to find him and share what a great experience it was. Another principal sent a group email the next day to encourage all of us. Overall, I was left feeling like this intervention had great potential to support us.

Shifting Group Dynamics within the PLC

The interviews for the PLC group took place between May 3, 2016 and May 17, 2016. Jonathan West, the principal at the high school had his interview first, on the third of May. During the interview, I found him very positive and dedicated as is typical for him. There were no indications that there were big changes coming. An unexpected turn of events was days away and would change the trajectory for Mr. West and impact our group. In just days, Mr. West was reassigned to Moore Elementary for the next school year. The announcement on the internet and in the paper was a surprise to all of us.

The next PLC meeting was scheduled for six days after the public announcement. I struggled with the agenda for the meeting and wondered if we could carry on with

business as usual using our Critical Friends Protocols. He shared in his interview days before that being principal at Rocky Ridge High was his lifelong dream. I wanted to acknowledge that something significant happened that impacted the group, and certainly Mr. West but I was unsure of the appropriate direction. As a professional, I felt the obligation to continue the course previously planned, but as a friend, I wanted to reach out to Mr. West in a way that would support him. Our group had not had the opportunity to interact with Mr. West prior to the PLC meeting to know how he was feeling about the move, if he was aware of the move in advance, or how he was adjusting to the news. This unexpected announcement impacted the direction of the PLC and the relationships of those participating. In the end, I determined that I would stay the course, respecting that Mr. West might feel uncomfortable discussing recent events.

The Second Professional Learning Community Meeting

The second principal Professional Learning Community meeting was held on May 23, 2016. In attendance at this meeting were all the principals invited. This included the high school principal who had not attended the previous PLC meeting. In addition to the new member, the context of our work was impacted by the move of Mr. West from the traditional high school to an elementary school. I documented in field notes the use of a more formal register as compared to the first PLC meeting. Not knowing the details or rationale for the move, I questioned which Critical Friends protocol to apply. The selected protocol focused on realms of influence. The protocol on realms of influence would focus on what I believed to be a more positive topic with the intent to build morale through a focus on the positive aspects of the position. I feared the tone might be impacted negatively by the uncertainty surrounding the move of Mr. West. Based on the

more formal register used by all participants, I could only assume the other participants were feeling as uncertain as I.

As each person entered the room, there were tense looks and heavy sighs, as documented in field notes. As each one came in, I asked them to complete the pre-survey. Mr. West did not arrive on time, and I noted his absence in field notes. We began the meeting with a check in circle, a Critical Friends protocol to transition to the meeting. The protocol for this check in asked participants to fill in the blank for the statement, “What comes up for me when we start to talk about equity, diversity, and democracy is (blank)”?. The issue of equity is one that all educators in Rocky Top Public Schools explore frequently. Our district has a diverse population of students both racially, ethnically, and economically. We also have an achievement gap between our white and non-white students. A significant challenge is to ensure equitable academic outcomes for students. The protocol would support a discussion about the efforts each person makes to address the achievement gaps in Rocky Top Public Schools. The resulting discussion revealed the overall tone of the meeting.

The first response to the question was, “This is a hot topic. When we hear the word diversity, the feelings are not positive. The conversation makes people uncomfortable.” Another chimed in, “Especially recently.” This was a reference to the status of the district as low performing, and the added pressures that are associated with that status. He continued, “The achievement gap. What a sore topic. There is still no good solution.” The group continued to discuss the challenges of equity becoming, “bigger and bigger.” Challenges included finding mental health services for students, the

connection between poverty and equity, the need to clothe and feed students in poverty, and the need for more social workers in schools.

At this point, I observed the overall tone of the group was negative, and I determined that perhaps the question did not support a focus on the positive. I switched gears at this point to the PLC protocol from Critical Friends in an effort to re-direct. This protocol was selected to support reflection on positive experiences. Again, I predicted the mood of the group would be quite tense as a result of the unexpected move of a colleague. Step one of the group protocol was to reflect on the following questions:

Take a few minutes to think about the most rewarding experiences you have had as a principal. What are the qualities of leadership that made these experiences so memorable? What are the critical characteristics of the leadership experiences for you as a leader? (National School Reform Faculty, 2014).

The protocol directs facilitators to provide a few moments to reflect, share, and then process a new leadership issue. The protocol allows conversation with peers to result in an action plan to address the related issue.

Our group read the protocol and took a few moments to reflect on various situations from our experience as principals. Mr. Johnson shared an experience he had taking a group to an Ed Camp, a professional development experience supporting the development on instructional technology. The group that attended went, “on their own free will.” The experience was described as refreshing and as a chance to get to know each other. He seemed to be speaking to building the culture in his building when he projected his year two as a chance to offer more experiences like the Ed Camp that would be voluntary, yet build school culture and capacity in a positive way.

Mrs. Lee was attending her first PLC meeting. She shared an experience that had a similar quality. Her staff raised money after school to send each student to the prom for free. This was a voluntary activity, and she reported all but two members of her staff attended. Mrs. Starnes shared an experience that empowered her students. She enrolled nine new students in one day. Mrs. Starnes asked veteran students to tour the new students and share information about the school. She reflected on how easy it is to “scurry around” trying to manage all aspects of the building. When she gave up control, and empowered students, she saw deep connections being formed between the students. Mrs. Starnes saw this experience as a reminder to “pause and let kids become involved.”

At this point in the meeting, Mr. West arrived. He apologized for being late, and mentioned he had been at his new school, meeting with the principal he replaced. That principal retired at the end of the 2015-2016 school year. He was nearly one hour late to the meeting, missing over half of the PLC meeting. I was relieved to see him, as I wondered if he would attend. We reviewed the task from the protocol for him, and he shared the program he started at Rocky Ridge High School (RRHS) that will allow “every type of student to have an option.” He worked with the local community college to accept a cohort of RRHS students, three local industries to create paid internships for students, and added a biotechnology course to begin in 2016-2017. He also referenced the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate pathway and ROTC as options. His investment in the school was apparent in his comments. Field notes reveal that through the course of the meeting, Mr. West did not mention his move, nor did the other participants.

Mrs. Starnes commented on the amount of trust necessary to take risks and try something new in a building. She commented, “Trust makes me feel safe to do what I need to do. It all comes out in the wash if I feel supported.” Mrs. Lee agreed, “You need that level of trust to feel safe, otherwise it is just dysfunctional.”

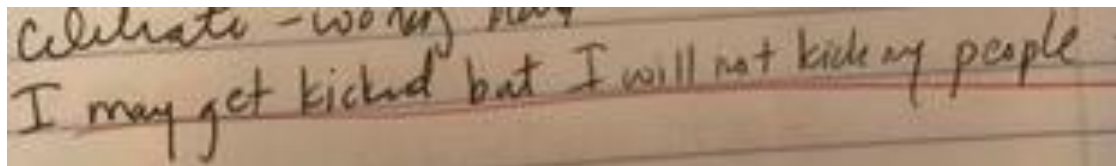
Trust is a theme that took the meeting to a more somber place. When Mrs. Lee shared a story of how trust can lead to hope, I remarked, “Hope and fun.” The group actually laughed at the idea of the work being fun. I asked, “Why do we laugh at the idea of fun. Is everything we do so serious?” I received a quick “yes,” and a very revealing comment about the results of the pressures of the job. Mrs. Starnes shared, “Some of the work can suck it (fun) out of you. In that state, we compromise relationships, trust, hope and fun. Sometimes, it is about keeping it all together for the kids. Everything is connected.”

The idea of everything being connected is significant. Our system had a significant change that has impacted all of us. I noted in field notes that the conversation about trust seemed to have a deeper meaning than was verbally acknowledged. The inference we all made was that Mr. West did not want to leave Rocky Ridge High. As a result, tensions were high. The group has expressed a great deal of respect for Mr. West. If he was moved, the implication was any of us could be moved.

The meeting began to turn to a conversation about all we have to do as principals. One remarked that things seem so task oriented, like marking things off a list. Another noted the pressures of testing, data tracking, and the lack of trust and uncertainty of not knowing what to expect. She shared the focus on data tracking and lack of mental health

supports. One shared, “I just know my teachers feel defeated.” Another principal shared, “I may get kicked, but I will not kick my people.” (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Field Notes from the Second PLC meeting, May 23, 2016



The challenges of the role were expressed in the conversation, a total departure from the protocol. At this point in the meeting, I chose to abandon the protocol and allow the conversation to take a more natural turn. In light of the tension, and the atypical negative tone, I stopped taking field notes to allow principals to share more freely.

The Third Professional Learning Community Meeting

While preparing for the third principal PLC meeting, I spent quite a bit of time examining protocols we could use to improve morale and focus on the positive. However, it became increasingly clear in the month between meetings that the protocols were not sufficient to support our group within the context of the recent changes. The issues addressed by the Critical Friends Protocols were not context specific, but more generally driven towards concepts such as equity and leadership. I determined I would need to create a specific protocol to address the topic of change specific to our context, even though I had concerns it would be a difficult conversation. I spent a great deal of time crafting questions to facilitate a group discussion, respecting the emotional nature of the situation. As the first two participants arrived, eyes were rolled and statements were made that indicated discomfort in talking with Mr. West, and frustration with the decision to move him. When probed, the first two participants shared they wanted to be respectful of Mr. West’s feelings, and they were unsure how or if we should discuss his move.

While I felt validated that others wrestled with the same dilemma, I still felt convicted to have a conversation about the move. Clearly, the three of us felt unsettled. In spite of that discomfort, I made the decision to embark on a frank discussion of the impact of such a change.

Attendance at this PLC meeting was important. The same core group of four from the first PLC meeting attended, including Mr. West. Mrs. Lee only attended the second PLC meeting, and was not present at this meeting or any more moving forward. She did not provide a reason for leaving the group. She left RTPS during the next school year. I began this group meeting by setting the stage for the conversation. I asked that we have an open and honest discussion about changes that happened in our group, specifically the move of Mr. West. I referenced our group norms that we placed on top of each agenda. I also asked that we discuss the impact of this change on all of us. I opened with a quick write activity to facilitate a transition to the reflective activity. During a quick write, participants respond to a question or prompt by recoding thoughts freely without regard to conventions, but focusing on quickly capturing feelings and ideas to prepare for a discussion. We responded to the prompt: “When decisions are made that are significant with unexpected changes within the organization, how does that impact colleagues, culture, climate within the organization, and what can be done to support during transitional times?” We all took a few minutes to record our thoughts. Responses included:

Instant increase in anxiety, uncertainty, speculation,

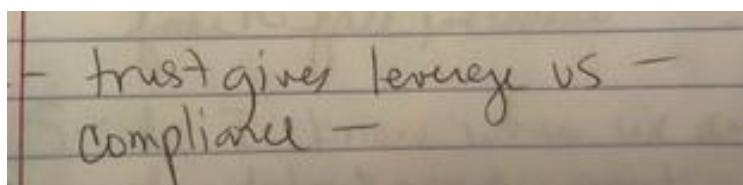
People lose focus, go into survival mode more focused on themselves than the team, causes stress, trust decreases, morale decreases, accountability decreases

Can cause insecurity or non-action, broken trust, us vs. them mentality, reveals previously held beliefs that haven't been shared

While we recorded responses, I also recorded my own field notes. The field notes recorded the tension in the room as people recorded the responses and a long pause when I attempted to start the conversation. The hesitation indicated discomfort in sharing. The conversation revealed several themes. The group acknowledged that there are many decisions that leadership at any level makes that can be difficult. Even though we accepted the fact that we may not agree with all of the decision made in a school district, we acknowledged the importance of several conditions that support the larger system during times of transition to support change. One of the conditions we discussed as important was the idea of frequent and specific feedback and communication. Frequent and specific feedback provides benchmarks for principals to ensure alignment of practices in schools to desired outcomes. Participants shared that feedback supported feeling more prepared to meet district goals. Most importantly, we discussed the importance of trust between schools and district leaders. The group noted that feeling prepared and included in the conversation promotes trust. The transparency of leadership through conversations around feedback also promotes the overall direction of the organization and again, promotes trust. One member of the group shared that “trust gives one leverage versus compliance.”

Figure 4

Field Notes from Third PLC Meeting, June 27, 2016



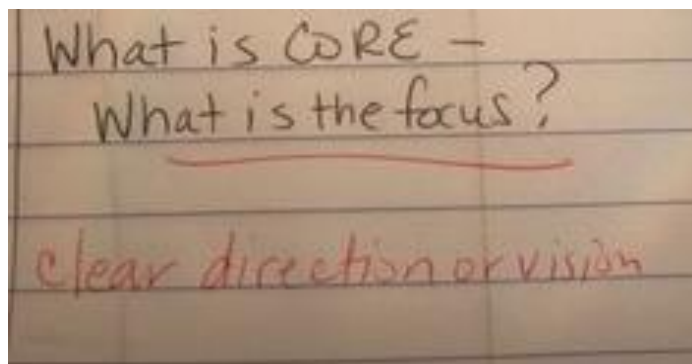
We generated a list of ways that trust is built in leadership positions.

- Physical presence
- Transparency
- Sharing vision
- Communication
- Clear expectations
- Focus on relationships

Trust as a theme emerged throughout the conversation. The fear of an us-versus-them mentality in the district as a result of the sudden personnel change was discussed. One principal remarked that it “is human nature to form cliques and try to protect one another.” As we explicitly processed the move of Mr. West, we also acknowledged the importance of building trust at every level of an organization, especially in our schools. Repeatedly, we talked about the importance of giving people within an organization a voice.

During the conversation, we also talked about conditions that undermine the trust and mission of an organization. Items we noted that undermine trust within our organization include: isolation, lack of communication, unclear vision, and unclear expectations.

Figure 5
Field Notes from Third PLC Meeting, June 27, 2016



Our member noted that, “People crave face to face interaction.” The importance of communication was reiterated by each member of the group in some form or fashion. We acknowledged that the communication should not just be vertical. We should also provide one another support. Mrs. Starnes shared, “I feel uncomfortable, like I am a bad colleague. I should be more supportive of everyone, but I get so wrapped up in myself that I can’t reply to a quick email.” At this point, we all discussed the drain on our time, and the toll it takes on our personal lives and our families. The discussion was much like the themes uncovered in the individual principal interviews and in the literature describing principal churn. One principal even asked, “Who really wants to do this?” The frustration with the scope of the principal’s role was most clearly articulated during this discussion as compared to any time during the improvement cycle.

While the intended purpose of this particular meeting was to have an open conversation about the move of Mr. West, what was revealed was much deeper. The role of the principal is very difficult and there is a lot of pressure associated with the role. The conversation left us reassured in the sense that we all felt the same way, but I was left wondering what more we could do to support one another. At the conclusion of the meeting, I openly shared the isolation I felt throughout my first year by stating my surprise that, as a first year principal, nobody came to check on me. In response, Mr. Johnson echoed my concern, “I am surprised as a first year principal in RTPS, nobody checked on me.” At that point, Mr. West shared, “I was surprised as a new high school principal, nobody checked on me.” At this point, we all shared a good laugh, realizing the common challenges we face unite us as colleagues and friends. I had assumed there was support in place for others that I had somehow missed. The realization led to a

commitment to support one another in a different way going forward. Our group noted the importance of trust. I viewed this last exchange as a turning point for our group. The open and vulnerable dialogue required a high level of trust. This trust was critical moving forward.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION

The principal PLC was designed to increase morale and decrease feelings of isolation. Field notes, interview and survey data were coded and analyzed to look for emerging themes and determine the impact of the intervention on the isolation and morale of the PLC members. Evidence collected during the intervention suggests that feelings of isolation decreased over time. While morale improved from the first PLC to the end of the third PLC, events within the local context had a significant impact on the morale of the principals.

Evidence of the Impact on Isolation

Isolation was identified as part of the problem statement; principals are isolated in their work and suffer from low morale. The literature provides significant evidence supporting the claim that principals are isolated in their work, yet highly visible within the community (Neale & Cone, 2013). The literature also points to isolation as a contributing factor to high rates of principal churn (The Leaders Network, 2014). Both initial and final interview data provided direct evidence to support the findings in the literature. Further, the evidence collected showed the intervention had a positive impact, decreasing isolation. Mr. Johnson acknowledged the isolation in the initial interviews and provided support for the intervention as he shared, “It’s a very unique position to be in as a principal. It’s a lonely job and not many people have the perspective that we have to be able to share with one another. I think that’s really important.”

Isolation plays a significant role in the day to day function of principals. Mrs. Starnes explained her desire for the work in PLCs to “bring reassurance.” She shared that, “Some of the frustrations that we deal with are reality. It’s part of the job, but

sometimes it can be so isolating it impacts your efficacy.” Mr. West also described feelings of isolation, sharing, “Being a principal can be extremely lonely.” All three expressed a desire for the emotional impact of the job to be acknowledged, including the loneliness of the position. When asked about anticipated outcomes of the intervention, Mr. Johnson hoped the PLC would, “bring reassurance, it’s really important.”

Field notes documented the realization of the group in the third PLC meeting that a systematic support system did not exist prior to the PLC. The final interviews asked participants to share the specific types of support principals need. Mrs. Starnes captured the dilemma faced by leadership at all levels when she shared, “We say support and we throw that general term around a whole lot.” When asked for specific supports desired, they asked for clear communication of the district vision and clarifications of the expectations for principals. They would also like someone to call and someone to call them to check in. Principals reasoned the focus on relationships would build and communicate trust in them to do their job well.

In the initial interviews, each principal expressed a desire for support in order to make a difference. The code for support had the highest frequency of any code applied to the interview data. The support provided by the PLC was intended to decrease isolation. When digging deeper to examine the types of support identified by participants in the interviews, support was defined in four ways. Support was identified as feedback, coaching, or team building. In addition, all three identified a specific need for emotional support. Specifically, two of the three interviewed defined support as having access to those who understand the role and can reassure them, “feel the same way.” The

reassurance was particularly important to Mrs. Starnes because of the isolation of the role.

As a support, both of the principals with experience in other districts expressed a need for a full time mentor that they could call anytime for advice or to ask questions, as they experienced the benefits of a mentor in other school districts. While the third did not express a specific interest in having an assigned mentor, she was fulfilling the role of mentor in our group, as she has the most experience among the participants. All of her years' experiences in the classroom and as a principal have been in RTPS, a system without a formal mentoring program for principals.

Often, when principals have questions, there is no one readily available to ask. In interviews, principals noted having someone to call with a question or concern as important. In the absence of a formal mentor, participants noted that a benefit of being together in the PLC was getting to know one another and each other's individual strengths, as knowing individual strengths makes it easier to know who to call with specific questions. Calling each other builds a support network that extends outside of the buildings.

While the initial interviews validated research findings and demonstrated a need for support, the final interviews revealed the impact of the PLC on isolation. Mr. West said, "I think the opportunity to share what was going well and also the things we were struggling with, it provided a real emotional support for all involved." The PLC provided an opportunity to build unity within the group and decrease the feelings of isolation, as principals dedicated time each month to be together.

The benefits noted in the final interviews included providing emotional support and creating of a sense of unity and team building. The emotional support provided by the PLC was lauded as the biggest benefit by all three interviewed. Mr. Johnson shared, “I think the support was the main thing that was important for me. Just to have people I knew I could talk to and that were in my corner and that were having similar challenges.” Mrs. Starnes had a similar response while Mr. West stated, “just having the emotional support of the group was a benefit.”

The final interviews revealed the benefits of the PLCs and a desire for participants to continue to meet monthly. Mr. West captured my thoughts well when he shared, “I think that we’ve learned stuff about each other that we didn’t know before, and now when you pick up the phone and call another member of the group, you really have an understanding, a true understanding of who they are, not just as principals, but as people. Also I think you realize that what you experience is not all that different from others. It gives you a good feeling in the sense that there are other people that are working through the same types of things you’re working through.”

The idea of a PLC for principals is a new one in RTPS. The idea was well received by our veteran member. She reflected on the benefits of the PLC stating, “We did take time to kind of build some unity with our colleagues that we honestly have not done with intent or focus.” She also shared that she would like this to continue, “to give us some reprieve, give us comic relief, some support,” and that the experience “was probably the greatest impact for me personally.” The benefits of the PLC were positive interactions with peers, an intentional effort that was missing prior to the intervention.

Impact of the Intervention on Morale

The aim of the intervention was to decrease isolation and improve morale of principals. The evidence presented in the field notes and interviews supported a decrease in feelings of isolation as a result of the intervention. The relationship between the intervention and principal morale was less definitive.

The initial interviews asked principals to describe the role of the principal. Information about the state of morale was revealed in their descriptions of the role. Carson Johnson described being a principal as running a small city. Johnson shared:

I think the job has become extremely complicated and the time required, the amount of patience required, the amount of knowledge required is almost overwhelming at times for people. As least that's the way I feel, so it's a very challenging job, and you take it home with you every single day. If you go home.

The participants described the role of the principal as a lonely job, and said that you must be a jack of all trades, but at the same time reported feeling "blessed" to be a principal. When asked how to describe the role to others, Bethany Starnes said,

I don't think folks not in the field of education could grasp the magnitude of what we're dealing with in terms of community connections and relationships, communication. We're dealing with everything over generations, even in elementary, three year olds to grandparents raising grandchildren. You really have to be a master collaborator and really understand what that means.

Jonathan West echoed the same sentiment when he described being a principal as, "one of the hardest jobs in our society, but one of the most rewarding." He said that he has wanted to be a principal since college and he was, "living my dream." Mr. West

shared that “I think the enormity of the decisions you make is one of the challenges.” Despite the challenges, Mr. West shared that he loves being a principal. The other two interviewed shared similar sentiments. Even though they agree there are many formidable challenges in the role, each one was committed to the role and hopes to make a difference. The descriptors of the role of principal from the interviews were consistent with the research findings. Overall, the participants describe the role as overwhelming and a large responsibility.

The challenges associated with being a principal are evident in the interview data and the pre and post survey data . One item consistently received the lowest ratings: I am able to focus on what is important in my building. The low rating is consistent with the descriptions of the role, demonstrating the difficulty of managing all of the aspects of being a principal. In fact, because the scope of the role is so large, principals said they would like their role to be demystified. In her final interview, Mrs. Starnes expressed a desire for clear communication of what is within her ability and what is a non-negotiable. She felt clear expectations would empower her to creatively address challenges within her building while respecting the direction of the district. All expressed a desire to feel part of a team or a whole with a unifying mission. The unifying mission is complicated by transitions in leadership that RTPS has experienced in recent years. The participants all agreed that, “there’s going to be change,” and “change is always necessary,” but underlying concerns point to a desire for schools to be more closely coupled with district goals and initiatives.

The overwhelming nature of the role has an impact on morale. Morale is a significant component of the problem statement and a primary aim of the intervention.

Two of the three noted concerns with morale and used the word “overwhelmed” to describe their feelings. Morale was not specifically mentioned by the third participant, but the overall tone of his interview was positive and he seemed highly motivated by his new role. All three PLC participants have always hoped to become a principal.

When asked to describe the previous school year in final interviews, Mr. Johnson described it as exhausting. Mr. West and Mr. Johnson described the year as having “ups and downs.” Mrs. Starnes, the mentor and most veteran principal of the group described the year using accountability data from her school’s performance on end of grade assessments. Both middle school principals discussed the volume of discipline and the drain discipline is on the time that could be used for instructional leadership. When framing the previous year, the principals mentioned the goals for the next year. Each one is facing a very different context within their buildings. The most veteran continues to build on her previous goals in the building. Achievement is up and in her fifth year at Blue Ridge, her vision continues to be cultivated. Mr. Johnson enters year two at his school with less transition and access to more tools, including technology, which will support his instructional goals and vision for instruction. He has lobbied for more resources and successfully adjusted the schedule and personnel to support his school vision. Mr. West, however, is facing another transition for 2016-2017.

Mr. West has a clear passion for his work as evidenced by his responses in both the initial and final interviews. In spite of his frustration with the involuntary move to the elementary school, Mr. West describes his year at Rocky Ridge High as “awesome,” and that he, “absolutely loved it every day.” He shared that being a high school principal was his dream and that he got to live out his dream. He said in his graduation speech that, “it

was the best year of my life, and I really meant that.” Mr. West discussed the politics of a large high school and the power struggles that take place during transition. He shared his work to build relationships in the school community and how much he loved being visible in classrooms to support instructional monitoring. While he also shared his optimism for a good year in his new role, it was clear to me that he truly enjoyed his time at Rocky Ridge High and would miss the opportunity to work within that context.

FIGURE 6. Survey results assessing principal morale.

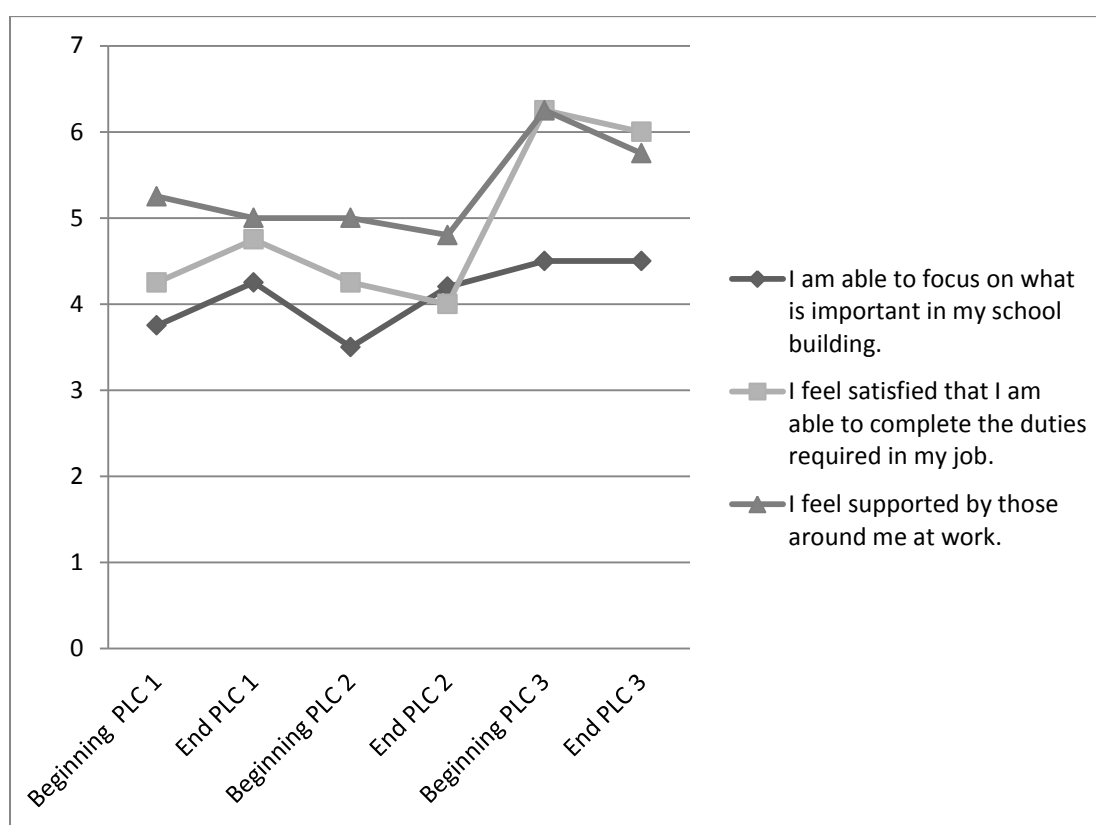


Figure seven shows three specific items on the pre and post meeting survey that reveal the impact of the intervention on morale: I feel supported by those around me at work, I am able to focus on what is important in my school building, and I feel satisfied that I am able to complete the duties required in my job. The survey reveals all three items saw at least some growth over the course of the intervention. While all three took a

dip during the second PLC meeting, they all revealed a positive trend by the finale measure and saw some growth. While this measure and interview data reflect slightly improved morale, events within the local context had an impact on the data as well. Survey data collected days after Mr. West was reassigned showed a decrease in every value, suggesting events within the local context have a significant impact on the morale of principals.

Table 4.

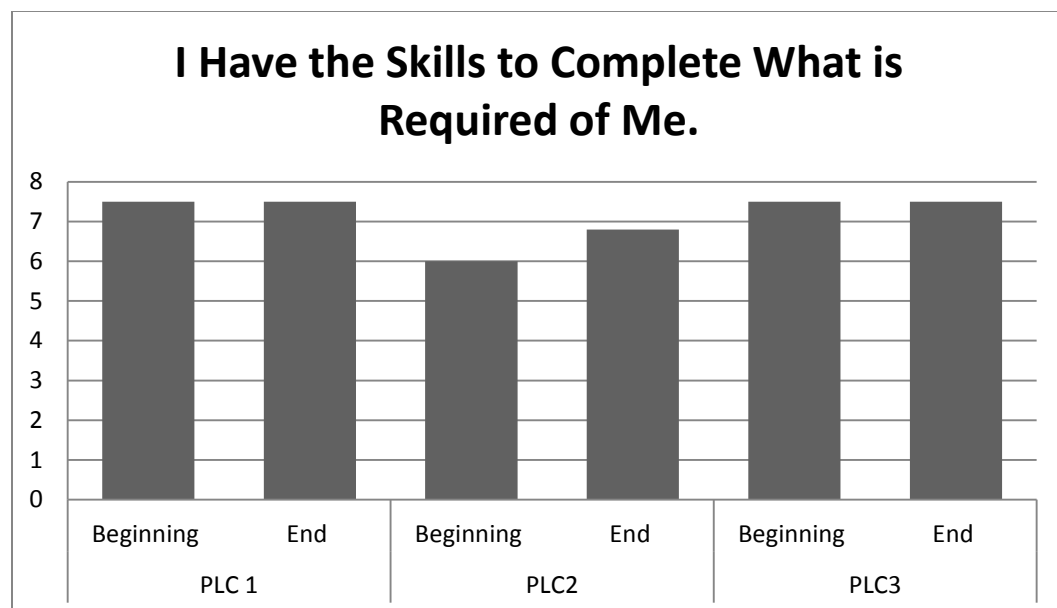
Summary survey data from the pre and post PLC meeting survey.

	PLC 1		PLC 2		PLC 3	
	Beginning	End	Beginning	End	Beginning	End
Overall, I am satisfied with my organization as an employer.	6	5.75	4.5	4	4.25	4.75
I would recommend Rocky Top Public Schools as a great place to work to my family and friends.	6.25	6.5	4.75	4.4	5	5.25
I speak highly of the experience working in Rocky Top Public Schools.	7.75	7.75	5.25	5.8	6	6
I am able to focus on what is important in my school building.	3.75	4.25	3.5	4.2	4.5	4.5
I feel satisfied that I am able to complete the duties required in my job.	4.25	4.75	4.25	4	6.25	6
I have the skills to complete what is required of me.	7.5	7.5	6	6.8	7.5	7.5
I feel supported by those around me at work.	5.25	5	5	4.8	6.25	5.75

The field notes from the second PLC meeting reflect a sense of frustration from participants. The dip in survey data and field notes suggests the move of Mr. West had a

significant impact on morale. The scope of the PLC meetings could not compensate for the strong feelings about the changes within the larger district context. The unanticipated change created feelings of vulnerability that are reflected in the field notes from the third PLC meeting.

Figure 7. Survey results assessing self-efficacy.



The goal of the PLC was not necessarily to impact the technical skills of principals, however survey data reveal information regarding efficacy. The item, I have the skills to complete what is required of me, consistently ranked high with an initial and final ranking of 7.5. The measure dipped during the data collection for the second PLC meeting which was shortly after Mr. West was moved. As mentioned previously, this dip was reflected in every item on the survey. The consistently high ratings suggest a strong sense of self-efficacy in the group.

Other Emerging Themes

The data analysis examined the specific impact of the intervention on morale and isolation, but also looked for other themes present in the data. Interview data, field notes,

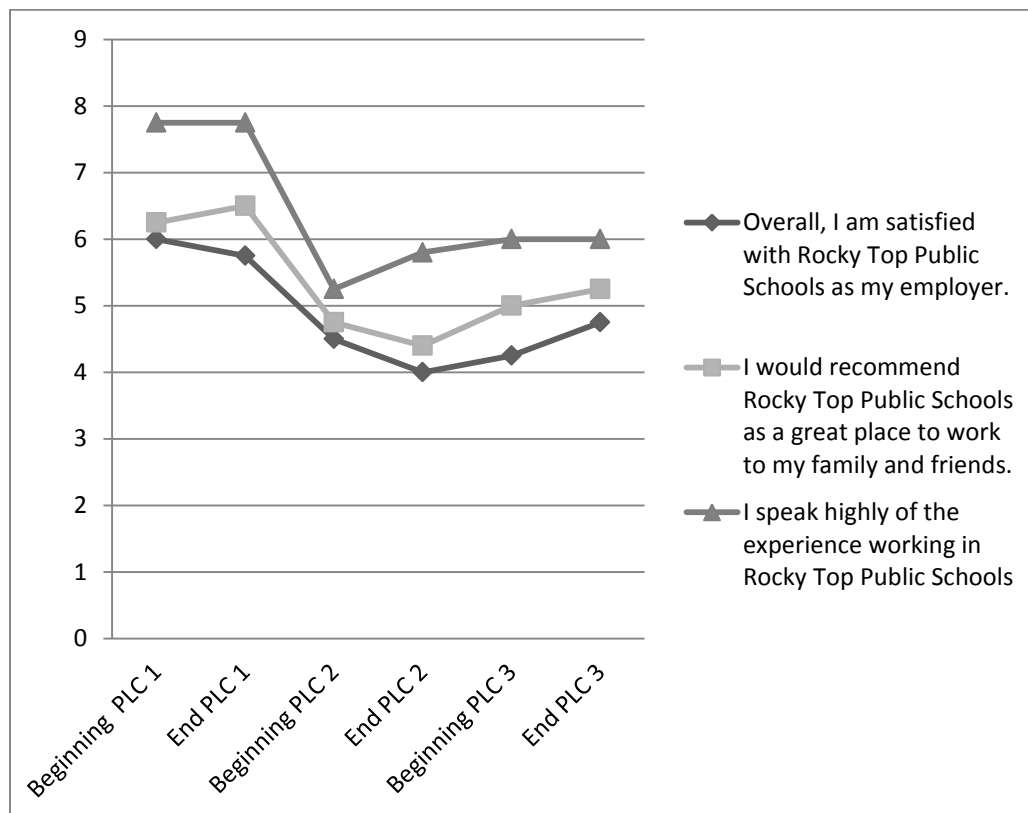
and survey data revealed other significant findings as a result of the PLC meetings. Themes that emerged from the interviews included a desire for specific feedback, clear vision, and trust.

The focus of this project was to increase principal support and development in Rocky Top Public Schools. Trust as an essential element for PLCs recurred in all interviews and in conversations recorded in field notes. While the group saw benefits of the work, one of the challenges for effective PLCs was building trust. In order to fully participate in the PLC, principals had to expose their vulnerabilities and challenges, which can be unsettling, particularly when there is a question about trust. Mr. West captured this idea in the final interview, “I think in order to have a strong support group, there’s got to be a high level of trust, because you’re making yourself extremely vulnerable.” The PLC would not be nearly as impactful if participants did not feel open to share. The idea of trust recurred in Mrs. Starnes’s final interview. While she would not list trust as a drawback when specifically asked, she noted the importance of building trust up front, “It took us a little time. I wouldn’t necessarily consider that a drawback, I think that’s a natural progression for any group.” Trust building develops over time as relationships are built.

Feedback as a specific type of support was mentioned by two of the three interviewed. I noted that feedback was a great need of the third participant as evidenced by his comments in the first PLC meeting. A desire for feedback was noted as something we all desired, as a way to improve our practice. Principals discussed wanting clear communication of expectations and coaching to reach goals. The PLC members viewed

specific feedback as a way to align school goals with district goals in an effort to meet expectations.

Figure 8. Survey items assessing the relationships with the district.



Three items specifically speak to the relationship between the PLC participants and the district: Overall, I am satisfied with my organization as an employer, I would recommend Rocky Top Public Schools as a great place to work to my friends, and I speak highly of the experience working in Rocky Top Public Schools. All three measures that specifically referenced the district all saw a decrease over time. The data indicate a larger issue with morale that could be complicated by the large amount of responsibility associated with the role combined with the amount of turnover at the district level in recent years.

Balancing Measures: Surveys of Assistant Principals

The assistant principal has a significant relationship with the principal. Often, this is one of few people with whom a principal can share concerns. While assistant principals are able to commiserate on many levels, the roles vary enough and the level of responsibility is different. Principals typically evaluate the assistant principal, creating a power differential that impacts the dynamics of the roles. During the intervention, a survey (Appendix M) was sent to assistant principals. The first was sent in May, shortly after the second PLC meeting. The survey was administered again at the completion of the project in late June. One school did not have an assistant principal, but had a lead teacher. The survey for assistant principals was completed by the lead teacher in that building. The survey consisted of seven items. With the exception of one question asking for the date, all other questions required respondents to rank their responses to specific items on a Likert scale from 0-10 with 10 being the highest value.

Of the six participating in the survey, all six completed the initial survey. Only three completed the final survey. Of the six, one assistant principal was reassigned to the classroom at the completion of the 2015-2016 school year. Another left on maternity leave. The low response rate on the final survey could also have been impacted by the work schedule of our assistant principals who typically work ten month contracts. The majority of respondents would recommend RTPS as an employer. All of the responses but one were eight or higher. The one outlying response was a four given by one respondent during the initial survey. All respondents recorded a seven or higher on both the initial and final survey asking how highly they speak of the district. The range was more widespread on the remaining questions.

When asked if their principal has time to complete duties required of the job, the range widens from two to ten on the initial survey, and five to ten on the final survey. When asked if their principal's opinion is valued in RTPS, the range is from four to ten on the initial survey with a cluster of three responses reported as an eight. The final survey has a range of six to ten on the same question. When asked if their principal has support required to do the job, responses range from a three to a ten on the initial survey and five to ten on the final. Based on the survey data, the three areas identified as concerns by assistant principals seem to be centered on the concept of time, support and feeling valued.

In reflecting on the data, the assistant principal and lead teacher responses were higher overall than the principals reported. I would surmise the responses were more favorable as a result of the principals sheltering the assistant principals from some of the difficulties of the job. Ultimately, principals are responsible for the success or failure of the school and work to protect employees from unnecessary burdens. Therefore, the weight of that role is significantly more challenging.

Additional Professional Learning Community Meetings

An unexpected outcome from the PLC was the desire to continue to meet as a group after the intervention cycle was complete. The participants wanted to examine the findings from the study. Two additional PLC meetings were held in October and November of 2016 prior to the board meeting. The discussion of principal support and morale continued during these two meetings. The meetings had loose agendas, but did not follow any protocol, instead focusing on the data collected from this study as a foundation for conversation regarding principal support and development.

The Fourth PLC Meeting: Sharing the Findings

At the conclusion of the initial intervention cycle, I examined the data collected through surveys, interviews, and during PLC meetings in the form of field notes.

Through my own reflections, I felt that, as a group, we needed the opportunity to examine the data together and determine if any additional steps needed to be taken to provide support for principals in our district. The data point to specific supports that our group would appreciate from district level leadership and from one another. The specific requests included feedback, phone calls or visits face to face to check in, clarification of the role of the principal, and a clearer picture of the overall district vision. With a clear focus on the types of support principals desire, our group needed to discuss the possibility of advocating for ourselves with district leadership.

The PLC group agreed to meet again prior to a board meeting in October of 2016. I shared a presentation of data entitled, *How Do We Take Care of Our Own?* The slides guided a discussion reviewing the entire improvement cycle, beginning with the problem statement; principals suffer from isolation and low morale. This statement was crafted with input from the group. I shared it again to ensure the group still agreed, and they did. Research was shared as a rationale for the importance of principal support, and a rationale for the choice of a PLC as an intervention. Since the intervention cycle began nearly a year earlier, the information served as a review for the group and a reminder of our purpose for the work. I reminded the group of the data measures and methods utilized to determine the results of the intervention as shared in the IRB. At the conclusion of the review, I shared my initial impressions from the data: the data made me worry about us as a group.

The data point to strong emotions from the other participants and from their significant others. One of the participants shared that his wife wanted to know what the significant other data revealed. The responses of the significant others point to a strong reaction to the amount of pressure and stress associated with the role of the principal. The responses were emotionally charged and pointed directly toward the lack of perceived supports as compared to the responsibilities required of principals. While I did share the raw data with the participants, we agreed that the data would not necessarily impact the decisions of the group moving forward and decided as a group to remove it from the findings. We agreed the message of the data from significant others is the high level of stress associated with the role of principal weighs heavily on those who love them.

Field notes identified contributing factors to the high levels of stress and emotion. Agreeing that principal morale was low, I shared a quote for the group to consider. I shared W. Edwards Deming's quote, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets." The discussion that followed revealed several conditions that contribute to low morale. The first condition was being pulled out of the building for frequently for meetings. The time away leaves the assistant principal in charge. This increases stress because of the expectation that principals serve as instructional leaders. Two principals in our district do not have assistant principals, leaving the building without an administrator when principals are pulled away for meetings.

In addition to being pulled from buildings, we discussed the workload as a factor in the stress of the position. Principals noted the desire for clarity from district level leadership regarding vision of the district and scope of the role. One participant

specifically requested to have, “a couple of things removed to improve morale.” A request to consider what is required as opposed to what is not required was suggested. The need for a direction, focus, and plan was restated by all of the members of the group. A specific list was compiled of items we felt could be eliminated. However, we acknowledged the difficulty determining what could be removed until we had a clear understanding of the direction and focus of the district. As school level leaders, we spent much time and effort in principal preparation programs studying the importance of a clear vision. We identified the need for clarity of vision as a way of streamlining our responsibilities as principals.

The group then took a turn, discussing the more abstract qualities we desire as principals. The group wanted to work in an environment with a high level of trust. The participants argued that trust between different levels of the system would foster two-way communication and the ability to directly request the items identified that would help support us. Those in the group shared that improved communication would support feeling valued.

As we reflected on the qualities of our own system that produce the feelings of low morale and isolation, we determined that we would like to support a positive change as much as we could. I asked the group, *how do we take care of us?* One of the participants identified a parallel between our concerns and the concerns of teachers in her building. She said, “We can sit and complain or we could do something about it.” In response to this idea, one of our members immediately determined that he would not feel comfortable having a conversation with district leaders regarding our recommendations. Our group discussed the concerns that the ideas would be considered insubordinate or

that they would be ill-received. On the other hand, we also considered this a great opportunity to make great strides in the relationship between the schools and district leadership. The conversation continued until the group had to leave or would be late for the school board meeting. To conclude, the group requested an additional meeting to consider future action. We agreed to meet prior to the next monthly board meeting.

I was encouraged that our group was able to see the value of the group and request an additional time together. In the interim, members agreed to consider the benefits and drawbacks of sharing the work with our district leadership.

The Fifth PLC Meeting: Reflecting and a Plan

Our group reconvened in late November of 2016 to continue the discussion of the data from the intervention and consider future actions as a result. As our group assembled this time, I noticed a genuine enjoyment in coming together and seeing each other. We spent a few minutes initially sharing updates from each person both professional and personal. This occurred naturally, in the absence of structured protocols.

Because I have spent quite a bit of time examining the data, I opened the meeting by sharing specific quotes used in this paper. I lifted quotes from interviews and PLC meetings to tell our story. I then focused my attention on letting the conversation between the others unfold in response to their own descriptions of our work. While our specific goal was to make decisions about action or inaction around the recommendations based on the data, I wanted to honor the time and efforts of the members of the group by revealing the pivotal moments and responses that reveal the heart of the work and are included in this study.

I shared the quotes used in the section describing the final interviews. Since the interviews were recorded several months prior, they expressed surprise at their own words. They nodded and shook heads in agreement with the quotes as positive affirmation of the content of their own words. The group expressed appreciation for sharing and a desire to read the final product. At the conclusion of the sharing, I then reminded the group of the goal of the meeting and shared a vision of the work to address the morale and isolation of the role. We needed to discuss what, if anything we would do with our findings. I presented evidence of the benefits of the group, and the limitations as included in this paper.

Discussing the limitations of the PLC to address morale led to the heart of the work, determining what, if any, action to take. Our group had requested to meet to consider sharing the data with district leadership in an effort to improve morale of principals. The conversation began with one participant sharing, “I don’t want this seen as us resisting change.” We all agreed that any sharing with district leadership would be an attempt to support the district, and we shared concerns about being positive in the delivery of any message we may craft. We understand the issues of isolation and morale are not unique to RTPS, and we want to be sure we do not give the impression that we are not supportive of our district leaders.

At that point, our attention turned to the mentor of the group. We asked her to share lessons learned from her transition to principal in one building, and the transition later from that elementary school to a middle school. She reflected on her experience stating that they were both very different. In one situation, she followed a successful principal and was tasked with maintaining the quality of the school. In the transition to

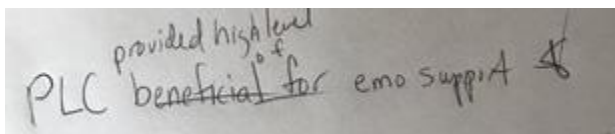
the middle school, she was tasked with leading positive change to the climate and curriculum of the building. She cited district support and vision for making the transition successful. Our mentor shared a key to the successful transition was her ability to ask questions about our work and feel safe to try new things. Another pointed out that she knew what was required of her and the expectations.

We contrasted this experience with our current situation and determined that the experience was consistent with our conclusion from the previous meeting. We desire a clear vision and expectation. We also want to be empowered to take risks in order to improve. Mr. West pointed out that if we make a mistake, we would like to have “someone to call that will help us at that point and understand that mistakes are part of the process.” This statement is a clear indicator of a missing component that is valued by the group. This idea was expressed throughout the intervention as important to the group. With that shared, we continued to discuss our next steps with the recommendations for district leadership.

Our discussion of what to do or not do with our results and recommendations continued to waiver back and forth. On one hand, Mrs. Starnes would argue, “Shame on us if we don’t share,” and responses from others, “I don’t think it would change much.” Fear was expressed from the member of our group who is principal at a low-performing school. He had concerns that sharing the data would put his career at risk. We all questioned the next steps we should take. My goal was to ensure that any steps I take as a result of this work would have the blessings of the group. At the end of the conversation, the group requested a carefully crafted response to the work.

The group decision was to keep the data within the scope of the project and refrain from a formal meeting or sharing session with district leadership. Instead, they requested that I share the following only when directly asked: The PLC provided a high level of emotional support. In addition, if asked about district responses, I could share that the group values clear directives and feedback on our performance and appreciate the ability to ask for help when needed. We all agreed that this statement positively captures the desire for the group to respect the authority of the district leadership while communicating our needs in a positive framework.

Figure 9. Field Notes Showing Group Summary of PLC Work



At the conclusion of the meeting, we all agreed that if I was not asked, the information would not be shared. For much of the meeting, the group requested that I not take notes or record while we deliberated. As we reached a decision on what to do, they asked that I write the decision down so we could see what was decided in writing. One of the limitations of autoethnography is the difficulty being both a researcher and member of the group. While determining an official result to share publicly, I had to be sensitive to the needs of the group. I did not want to impose my opinions. I was concerned about my voice being more prominent. At this point, I refrained from input, and utilized questioning to clarify in an effort to minimize my own opinion.

The intention of this intervention is to decrease feelings of isolation and improve morale. The data collected during this study suggest that the PLC decreased feelings of isolation. This is reflected in interviews and in the field notes from the PLC meetings

and was described as creating a sense of unity. The data show morale is connected to many factors that may not necessarily be exclusive to the implementation of the PLC. The data collected show the desire for principals to have structures in place for emotional support from others who currently serve in the role and can relate.

The data point to the importance of trust as a foundational component of collaboration in a PLC. The group described the importance of trust at all levels of an organization in interviews and during the PLC meetings. The participants recognized the trust that was built over time in the PLC as relationships were strengthened. This is evidenced in the interviews and field notes from the PLC meetings.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

The principal has a significant impact on student achievement (School Leaders Network, 2012). The literature shows effective schools have effective principals (James-Ward, 2011). The literature also paints a picture of a job that is complex and stressful with high turnover. The data from this study reflect a similar picture of the role of principal. Field notes demonstrate the high level of stress and emotion that were shared during PLC meetings. The group discussed the pressures of public accountability measures. To address principal morale and isolation, a principal PLC was created. The findings suggest a decrease in feelings of isolation, while the survey data show an increase in items that measured morale; the other data measures indicate that the intervention alone was not enough to support positive morale. The group drafted a summary statement that is consistent with findings: the PLC provided a high level of emotional support. Creating a scheduled time to meet was the first challenge to address when designing the intervention. With long hours, it is difficult to find a time that works with each principal's schedule. The directive by the superintendent to attend monthly board meetings created a window of time for principals to meet. Decreasing isolation seemed to be achieved through regular communication in the PLC meetings. However, the issue of morale was impacted by factors outside of the scope of the intervention.

Discussion

The intent of the intervention was to create a principal PLC aligned with the DuFour model. In reality, what was created did not fit the definition of a DuFour model PLC. Instead, the group created is described more appropriately as a Community of Practice or CoP. One of the most significant results of the experience was the evolution

of my understanding of the distinction between professional learning communities and communities of practice. As previously noted, the term PLC is used to describe different types of group meetings. The term PLC and communities of practice are often used interchangeably. While designing the intervention, I selected a PLC for the structure as a result of my experiences in facilitating PLC meetings at my own school and my vision of what I thought the work would be. The PLC meetings at my school are mandatory grade level meetings to discuss student progress based on data. In the school level PLC meetings, I create and facilitate the agendas. The group has a common goal, which is improved student achievement, and they are designed around DuFour's four questions. What I observed over time is that there are differences in PLC meetings that I have participated in previously and what I experienced during the intervention, which was the development of a Community of Practice (CoP).

Trust is an important component to support risk taking and feel comfortable to communicate honestly (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The most pivotal work was accomplished in the CoP when the level of trust was established among participants. Successful schools have high levels of trust and attract the best people (Fink, 2014). All CoP members valued trust as evidenced by comments during interviews and in CoP meetings. When we were able to have an open discussion about Mr. West's reassignment, and we trusted each other enough to share our thoughts and emotions with one another, relationships changed. The level of trust was established. We had genuine care and a commitment to one another (Noddings, 2015). That is when I recognized the work transcended that of a PLC; we had established a Community of Practice.

Groups of people who take collective responsibility for identifying their own learning needs and plan how they might be addressed constitute a community of practice. A community of practice involves a group of people with a common passion and desire for learning from one another (Bengston, 2012). Participants in a community of practice learn how to improve as they interact regularly and build trust (Wenger, 2007). Over time, our group established trust. This trust combined with voluntary attendance constitutes a level of collaboration that extends beyond the reach of a PLC. PLC meetings typically require attendance and may or may not have mutual trust among the participants. When we met the fourth time to share findings, and the group requested a fifth meeting, I realized we had formed something different that extends beyond the PLC format to create real community. While the PLC model focuses on examination of data for reflection on practice, the reality was our group needed a different type of support that was provided in the CoP format.

A community of practice holds promise to support principals emotionally, decrease feelings of isolation, and provide a structured opportunity for reflective practice. A limitation of the meetings is clear, however. The meetings cannot shelter principals from the pressures of the larger context. Principal morale is influenced by many different variables. The larger context can influence morale in spite of positive interventions. The move of one of our members was an emotional and unsettling event that left all of us feeling anxious and distrustful. The unstated concern was if he could be moved, so could we.

Turnover of principals is well documented in the literature (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). Turnover in the principal position impacts schools in myriad ways which

often include a new vision or direction. Turnover at the superintendent's level impacts districts in similar ways. Our system has had six superintendents in nine years. The group clearly expressed a desire for clarity of vision for their work from the district office. Turnover is the reality for schools and districts. When the leader of the district changes, the vision and direction often change. I would argue that the changing direction would add an additional challenge for principals, and an issue that requires intentional efforts to mitigate from the district level. Transition is particularly challenging for those with experience during multiple transitions. Our veteran member requested clarity most frequently. I would argue that establishing a clear vision is paramount during transition in leadership to support the work of the organization.

Findings and Application for Others

The efforts to address principal isolation and morale in my district through the creation of a community of practice have resulted in some positive benefits including emotional support and stronger trust within the group. What makes this intervention unique is the participants in the intervention are also the ones who benefitted. The implementation of a principal CoP did not require monetary investments, and therefore can be implemented in other settings. In reflecting on the experience, I would make two recommendations for others interested in principal support and development. First, principals need contact with other principals. Second, district offices should allocate time, resources, and examine existing structure to support the alignment of the vision and a closer coupling of the efforts in school buildings and schools.

Principals need contact with other principals. The demands of the job are well documented. In an effort to support principals, opportunities to relate with others who

understand the challenges of the role should be encouraged. In fact, they need time to interact with others who not only understand the role, but those who are currently serving in the role. This interaction extends beyond the social, and should specifically allow for conversation about issues that directly impact the day to day work of principals. While others may be well-intended in their support, speaking with someone who can empathize with the pressures of being a principal is important for the emotional well-being of principals and supports the development of leadership. The time could be used to ask and contemplate the technical aspects of the role, or to dig in to the challenges of leadership for cultural change and school improvement. This type of connection is not what most would anticipate a principal would need for support. While most believe a principal should be fully capable of being effective once hired, in reality, a principal continues to need support and leadership development while serving in the role. According to the findings, principal need emotional support to manage the overwhelming responsibility and many demands of the role.

Scheduled principals meetings do not offer the type of support necessary to provide the emotional support needed. The type of support I am recommending should be driven by principals and the needs they self-identify. Not only does it empower principals as a group, but the time together fosters relationships that can be leveraged at any time. The opportunity to interact will combat feeling of isolation so many principals experience. While CoPs may not necessarily improve morale, the CoP process will address isolation and provide emotional support. The role of the principal is taxing and takes a physical and emotional toll. The participants in the study have a high level of personal investment in the students and schools they serve. As a result, I believe the

desire to perform and produce is more stressful. The principals in the study have the skills and attitudes that make them highly desirable in school leadership roles. Often districts provide additional training for principals, assuming the training will support retention and improved student achievement. All principals are already licensed and experienced educators with extensive training. The findings clearly suggest a need for emotional support exists and should be prioritized. I would argue the intentional implementation of emotional support holds promise to retain dedicated principals.

Districts can no longer afford to ignore principal churn. At a time when fifty percent of principals quit during their third year, it is critical that districts address the issue of principal turnover. The negative impact of churn impacts achievement and finances. The recommendations outlined here have minimal financial costs, but could result in tremendous benefit for the students our schools serve.

The second recommendation from the work is for district offices to invest resources specifically for principal support and development. Emerging research suggests that “schools and district with high levels of social capital or a strong web of social relationships in which trust, risk taking, and interaction are central, educators may be better able to improve outcomes” (Daly et al, 2015). In spite of this, most district offices are not designed to offer the types of support and district culture the literature recommends (Honig, 2012). Relationships between the district and the schools are not intentionally cultivated in a way that will build trust between levels. Districts can support trust between levels by providing time for principals and district administrators to work on team building, creating a collective vision, and discussing common goals with an emphasis on building relationships. In addition to collaboration between levels, districts

should consider structures that support collaboration of principals with one another and reevaluate ways to provide time for principals to collaboratively discuss problems within their practice. Districts should provide specific work embedded opportunities for principals and district leaders to spend time together. Encouraging collaboration at all levels would send a message that the work is valued and endorsed. In addition, explicit communication of the district vision and the expectation for the role of the principal in carrying out that vision will support alignment between the two levels. This is particularly important during times of transition. In addition to a clear vision and expectations for principals, district offices should create structures to provide frequent and specific feedback to principals regarding their ability to carry out the work as aligned to the articulated vision and expectations. The literature provides support for the alignment of processes and structures for a “coherent approach to reform” (Daly et al., 2015). Principals in this study strongly desire for guidance and direction from the district. As frequently as the idea of feedback appeared in the data, I would argue the use of specific and intentional feedback for novice principals is an area that has the potential for future studies. The desire for feedback was strong within this group. In addition, potential future studies examining the structures in district offices that support trusting relationships with schools would offer insights and models to support districts seeking to improve in this area.

Reflection

When I accepted the opportunity to become a building principal, I had no experience as an assistant principal. I had very little time before school started, and I was hired by an outgoing superintendent and no new superintendent had been named. My

first week on the job was the week of the district retreat. I had two weeks in my building before students arrived. I felt the overwhelming weight and responsibility for the safety, welfare, and academic success of more than 400 students. I had no idea how demanding the job would actually be. Immediately, I was met with a higher profile and more visibility as I was recognized by community members with children at my school and community members without children in my school. Cards from strangers wishing me well and pointed questions from strangers not wishing we well ensured my awareness that the role is responsible to many. By September, I realized I would need to have a village of my own in order to support myself and those in my charge.

The research on principal churn and the demands of the job are concerning to me as a proponent of public education. I see first-hand the need to support and retain quality candidates at every level of our public schools in order to provide equitable outcomes for children. I have a love for my principal colleagues and an admiration of their work. As a novice principal, I was surprised that I had no formal support system in place to orient or guide my practice. During the 2015-2016 school year, RTPS had four principals in a similar situation. Did we all feel the same way? Our district was in transition, looking for a new superintendent while an interim held the position. I felt the isolation of the job. Our district was also identified as low-performing during that year. Morale was low. I began to wonder how principals could collectively address the problems of low morale and isolation in Rocky Top Public Schools.

The experience of crafting an intervention for a group in which I am a part was personally empowering. The original rationale for the work was my own recognition as a first year principal that there were no existing supports or monetary resources available to

support and develop new principals in our district. Having transitioned to the role from the district office and without the benefit of working as an assistant principal, I felt the weight of responsibility, uncertainty, and the isolation of the role. I recognized I needed something to help me to be successful. I was not certain what I needed, but I felt a strong desire to connect with other principals. I needed to ask questions and learn from others in the role. The only experiences I had with other principals were required meetings structured by district or state level leaders. That format limited my ability to connect and discuss the day to day challenges I was facing as a principal. In fact, the meetings we had often left me with more questions for my peers. As a new principal, the content of the meetings seemed familiar to others but I was unfamiliar with a large portion. I hesitated to ask questions in the whole group, afraid to appear unprepared. The desire to ask questions in a safe environment fueled the selection of the PLC which evolved into a Community of Practice as an intervention for principals.

The use of autoethnography as the data collection method seemed to me to be most appropriate given the unfolding story of my own first year and my role as a participant researcher. Ellis (2007) proposes:

As a genre of writing and research, autoethnography starts with a personal experience and studies the 'us' in relationships and situations. Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience. (p. 13).

Autoethnography includes the voice of the researcher. As a participating member of the group and one who would benefit from the results of the intervention, it

seemed natural to record my observations and my own thoughts as I experienced the interactions within the Community of Practice. I had a clear understanding of the way the CoP impacted a participant as a result of my direct participation. However, the challenge was to allow the group to drive the process without allowing my own personal experiences and feelings to overpower the collective experience. I found it a fine line to walk at times, particularly when one of the members was reassigned during the intervention cycle. The data responded with a dip as we all felt the weight of the change. The person moved was my supervisor during my administrative internship and someone whom I admire a great deal both professionally and personally. The move left us all feeling vulnerable and exposed. I spent a long time reflecting on the impact of that move on our group before meeting for the third CoP meeting. I wanted to be sensitive to his feelings, but also acknowledge the impact of the decision on the morale of our group as well.

The move of one of our own was a time of high emotion, but I believe I underestimated the amount of emotion associated with the stress of the role day-to-day. Tears were shed during each CoP meeting. Tears were shed because of time lost from family due to work, associated with a feeling of defeat, shed at the loss of a life-long dream to work at the high school, and tears were associated with frustration over the sheer volume of work. As a principal, I understand the emotion is the result of having to be the strength for so many each day. Putting others first, seeking solutions for others, and continually keeping a fast paced environment running takes a toll on people over time. The emotion overflows in the CoP meetings as those defenses are lowered around others who share the same experiences. In each case, we all understood the tears and did

not feel judgement of one another, but empathy. The research outlines the unique challenges of the modern principalship. I have found that even though people understand my job is demanding, they do not fully understand the responsibility of the role. Therefore, it is important for principals to be together to share the hard times and tears and also the successes and laughter as well. As a group, we agreed the CoP had the greatest impact as a provider of emotional support.

I have included several recommendations for district offices. Because of my work at both levels, I have a unique perspective about these recommendations. I see the potential for substantial improvement when the two levels collaborate. I know the limitations and challenges of the district office as they focus on big picture policy and implementation of many initiatives driven locally and at the state and federal level. Ensuring compliance and growth in legislated accountability measures and federal and state regulations is a high stress responsibility. I know the intentions of those who work at the district level are to help the schools to be successful. I have to be sensitive to the fact that not all of my colleagues have established the types of relationships I have with district leaders, nor do they have that perspective. Because of my work in both settings, I have a strong desire to build bridges between the two. I believe the reluctance to share outcomes with the district office could be indicative of a lack of trusting relationships with the district office. Trusting relationships take time, and turnover makes this process difficult to sustain.

I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on the lessons for my own leadership as a result of this project. As I recognized my own need for feedback, I have committed to provide more feedback for my staff. The protocols used from Critical Friends guided a

discussion of conditions that help me to be my best. I recognize there are parallels that exist between what I need and what my staff need. In the midst of the management tasks and the fast pace of the day to day responsibilities of the work, the importance of building trust and providing feedback can get lost. The time to reflect in the CoP meetings about the importance of relationships helps me to focus on what is important as I cultivate my own school culture.

I am also acutely aware of the importance of sharing the vision in any organization. Sharing the vision provides a structure for the work of the organization (Senge, 2014). People want to know what is expected. Without a vision to guide the work, people are left to try to focus on everything, which may not necessarily be the right things. Sharing of a vision and strong communication support trust within organizations and ensures that each member can articulate the responsibilities of their role to make the vision a reality.

The experience of organizing and leading the CoP has left me with a great deal of respect for my colleagues. I have studied their words, listened to their stories, and shared their joys and their fears. I admire their heart and desire to support positive outcomes for the children of our community. I see the sacrifices of time and the energy they devote to their schools. Our work together has strengthened my desire to support my colleagues. As a Title 1 school district, I have concerns about our ability to sustain strong leadership, mitigate the impacts of turnover in leadership roles and in the teaching staff, and support strong academic achievement for our students. Our collective efforts to support one another can a difference for students, families, and our communities.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix A – Sample Principal Meeting Agenda
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- Appendix C – Initial Survey Questions of all RTPS Principals
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- Appendix E – Problem Definition by Design Team
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Appendix A: Sample Principal Meeting Agenda

April 12, 2016

Welcome RTPS Leaders and Visitors

Tweet About It: #Rockytopschoools

- Professional Development Lab at RTPS Resource Center
- Professional Development for Elementary Principals on Apr. 26
- Remediation Plans due Apr. 6, 2016
- School Website
- Marquee Signs
- School Cleanliness
- Principal Evaluations
- Staff Needs 2016-2017

AdvancED School Checklist for RRHS, RTA, BRMS, SES

- Communication about your school for AdvancED
- Tues., Apr. 12th - designated school provide school lunch
- AdvancED Team Meeting: Principal, SLT chair and/or member
 - Optional: assistant principal and/or instructional facilitator
- Locked Conference Room/Meeting Room for AdvancED Team
 - Water/drinks
 - Snacks
- Principal Interviews on Mon., Apr. 11th @ 1:45 p.m. in the Board Room

CORE Instruction

- What is Core Instruction in RTPS?
- Certified April EC Headcount
- AIG Headcount due April 30th
- [EOY Testing Reminders](#)
- Bonafide Summer School
 - [Elementary School](#)
 - [Middle School](#)
 - [High School](#)
- [Credit Recovery Summer School](#)
- Inspired Learning Transition Plan - Rising 6th/9th

Appendix B: READY Principals Meeting Agenda Utilized by the North Carolina
Department of Public Instruction.



North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
REGIONAL PRINCIPAL READY MEETING

..... **Agenda**

8:00 – 9:00 am	Registration and Coffee
9:00 – 9:30 am	Opening and Introductions Dr. June Atkinson & Dr. Lynne Johnson
9:30 – 11:30 am	Diverging Pathways Jenn Preston & Tom Tomberlin <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship between Student Growth and Evaluation Results • Importance of Correlation • Evaluation Reliability
11:30 – 12:30 pm	Lunch
12:30 – 3:00 pm	Interactive Group Sessions Kim Simmons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break-out Sessions for • Elementary School Principals • Middle School Principals • High School Principals

..... **Helpful Links to Home Base Webinars**

Link to Home Base Webinars: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/homebase/training/schedule/>
TUESDAYS: Educator Effectiveness
THURSDAYS: Instructional Improvement System

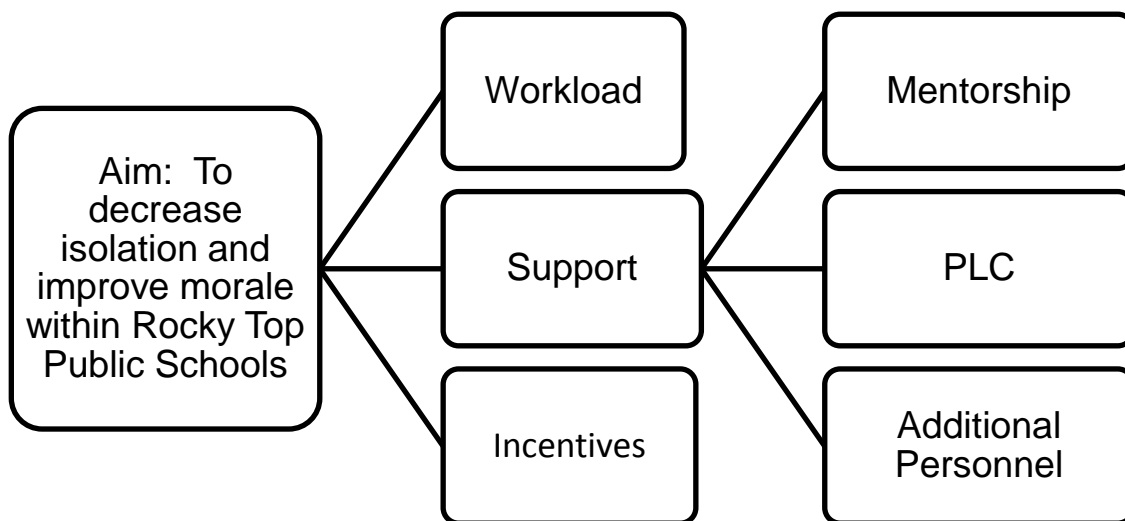
Link to Face-to-Face Professional Development: <http://bit.ly/16unZr3>

Home Base Website: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/homebase/>

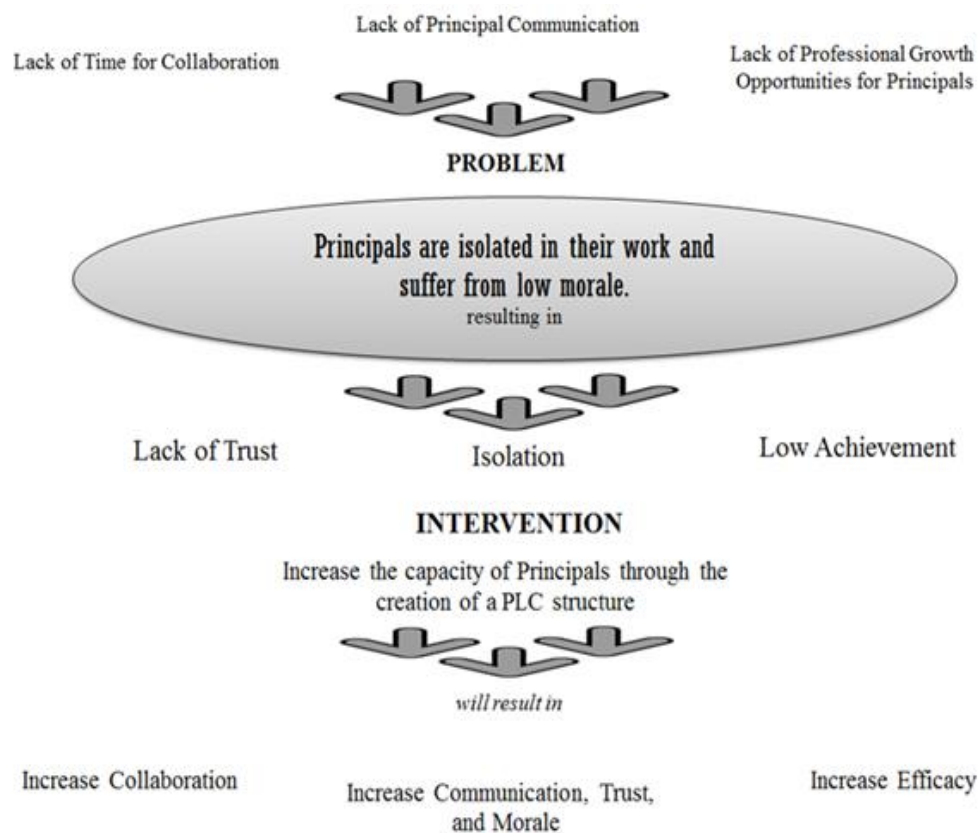
Appendix C: Initial Survey Questions of all RTPS Principals

1. How many years experience do you have as a principal?
 - a. 0-3
 - b. 4-7
 - c. 8-10
 - d. 11 or more
2. Indicate your gender.
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
3. Indicate the level you serve.
 - a. Elementary
 - b. Secondary
4. How often do you speak with other RTPS principals outside of monthly principals meetings?
 - a. Never
 - b. Less than once a month
 - c. Once a month
 - d. 2-3 times a month
 - e. Once a week
 - f. 2-3 times a week
 - g. Daily
5. In the last month, how often have you reflected on your practice with another principal?
 - a. None
 - b. Little
 - c. Some
 - d. A lot
6. In the last six months, how many opportunities have you had for professional development specifically geared toward developing principal leadership? (open response)
7. If you received professional development in the last six months, please describe below. (open response)
8. List the barriers to principal collaboration. (open response)

Appendix D: Driver Diagram



Appendix E: Problem Definition by Design Team



Appendix F: Personal Work Product: SMART Goals

Specific	Measurable	Attainable	Relevant	Time
Establish a monthly date and time for PLC meetings	Through the use of calendars and attendance of participants	Through a joint commitment of participants	Will provide a platform for collaboration and support	By November 2015
Define PLC structure	Through collaboration with design team	Through collaborative agreement of purpose of PLCs and needs of Principal group	Will be basis for interventions for 2016-2017	By December 2015
Implement Interventions	Through work with Principal PLC and with support of Superintendent	Host and organize PLC meetings, coordinate resources as needed	Will provide principals differentiated support	By Summer 2016
Evaluate Interventions	Through surveys, focus groups, interviews, and reflective journals	I can evaluate progress incrementally throughout the intervention	Will inform progress of interventions	At the completion of 2015-2016 school year.
Make adjustments based on feedback	Through evaluation of progress as determined by surveys, focus groups, and interviews	Attainable as part of the established Principal PLC	Relevant to determine if interventions are effective	January through June 2016

Appendix G: PLC Meeting Agenda from March 21, 2016

Rocky Top Public Schools Principal PLC Agenda
April 25, 2016

Materials to bring to meeting: None required

PLC Members:
Bethany Starnes
Carson Johnson
Jonathan West
Jennifer Griffin
Christine Lee

Goals/Outcomes:

Meeting Norms:

- 1.) Vegas rules**
- 2.) Trust is important**
- 3.) Stay on track**

SMART Goal:

We will create a PLC structure for new Principals and a mentor to meet bi-monthly beginning in November of 2015.

Topic for Discussion	Who?	Estimated Time	Minutes
Survey			
Opening: Norms reminder, assign recorder to take and submit minutes	Jennifer	5 minutes	
IRB paperwork and processes Interview Dates	Jennifer	5 minutes	
Check in Circle (CF Protocol)	Entire Group	15 minutes	
Constructivist Protocol for Adult Work (CF Protocol)	Entire Group	60 minutes	
Survey			

Appendix H: Critical Friends Protocol Used on April 25, 2016



Check In Circle

Developed by JoAnn Dowd

Check In Circle allows folks to transition from life outside to being present at a meeting or CFG.

Process

Sitting in a circle, each person takes a turn sharing “where they are” to whatever degree they feel comfortable, or they can pass. Others do not respond. (1-2 minutes each)

Suggested Adaptations

- Good Thing, Bad Thing: Each person says a good thing going on in their life and then a not so good thing.
- Fill In the Blank: Everyone is asked to respond to a statement, such as “What comes up for me when we start to talk about what equity, diversity and democracy is (blank) ”

Appendix I: Pre and Post Meeting Survey Questions

1. What is today's date?
2. Indicate if the survey is at the beginning or end of the meeting.
3. Overall, I am satisfied with my employer.
4. I would recommend Rocky Top Public Schools as a great place to work to my family and friends.
5. I speak highly of the experience working in Rocky Top Public Schools.
6. I make am able to focus on what is important in my school building.
7. I feel satisfied that I am able to complete the duties required in my job.
8. I feel supported by those around me at work.

Appendix J: IRB Informed Consent Forms

Informed Consent Form for Principals

How Do We Take Care of Our Own?

Principal Support and Development in Rocky Top Public Schools

Introduction:

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that the following explanation of the proposed procedures be read and understood. It describes the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits to the study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

What is the purpose of this research?

Principals suffer from low morale and are isolated in their work. Research suggests that Professional Learning Communities (PLC) can effectively combat isolation and improve morale. As an intervention, principals new to buildings in Rocky Top Public Schools will participate in a professional learning community with an experienced mentor principal and data will be collected to determine if the PLC has an impact on morale and isolation.

What will be expected of me?

Interviews, surveys and field notes will be collected to determine the impact of the PLC on principal morale and isolation. Principals will be expected to attend the PLC meetings each month from March to June and participate in two individual interviews held at a time and location of your choosing. After reading this consent form, you may elect to participate by signing at the bottom of the page indicating your agreement to participate.

How long with the research take?

The data collection period will extend from March 21, 2016 through June 27, 2016. Participants will attend one Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting for two hours once per month, and one twenty minute interview at the beginning of the research window and one twenty minute interview at the completion of the data collection window. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Survey data will be collected as part of the PLC meeting and will not require an additional time commitment.

How will you use my information?

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data in this research. Only members of this research team will be allowed to inspect sections of the research records related to this study. The data from the study may be published but in all instances data will be pooled from all interviews and surveys and confidentiality will be assured. Answers will not be anonymous, but will be confidential. Data will be stored on a computer at Slate Elementary School in a locked office on a computer that is password protected.

Can I withdraw from the study if I decide to?

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or may discontinue participation AT ANY TIME, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may request to have the recording device turned off, decline to answer any question(s) or totally withdraw from the study by communicating your wishes to the investigator. The investigator has the right to withdraw you from the study AT ANY TIME. Your withdrawal from the study may be for reasons related solely to you or because the entire study has been terminated.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in the PLC beyond potential discomfort due to the discussion of sensitive topics such as the morale and isolating nature of the principalship. Some of the questions asked of you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break or stop your participation in this study at any time.

How will I benefit from taking part in the research?

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help in gathering insights which will be used to provide valuable information that could be used to design support for all principals in Rocky Top Public Schools and in other districts. The possible indirect benefits are that you will have the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue with other principals in Rocky Top Public Schools, develop a network of local support, become better informed about the successful practices of other principals and contribute to the knowledge of the field. An abstract of this

research study will be made available to you upon request using either the email or phone number of the investigator who conducts your interview.

Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the research?

Contact me Jennifer Griffin at 828-238-3424 (or jsgriffin2@catamount.wcu.edu). You can also contact Dr. Ann Allen, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for the project, at 828-713-7325 (or alallen@email.wcu.edu). If you have concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, contact the chair of WCU's Institutional Review Board through the office of Research Administration at WCU (828-227-7212).

Right to refuse or withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or may discontinue participation AT ANY TIME, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may decline to answer any question(s) or totally withdraw from the study by communicating your wishes to the investigator. The investigator has the right to withdraw you from the study AT ANY TIME. Your withdrawal from the study may be for reasons related solely to you or because the entire study has been terminated.

I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY
AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

My signature below indicates my voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Informed Consent Form for Assistant Principals and Lead Teachers

How Do We Take Care of Our Own?

Principal Support and Development in Rocky Top Public Schools

Introduction:

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that the following explanation of the proposed procedures be read and understood. It describes the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits to the study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

What is the purpose of this research?

Principals suffer from low morale and are isolated in their work. Research suggests that Professional Learning Communities (PLC) can effectively combat isolation and improve morale. As an intervention, principals new to buildings in Rocky Top Public Schools will participate in a professional learning community with an experienced mentor principal and data will be collected to determine if the PLC has an impact on morale and isolation.

What will be expected of me?

Interviews, surveys and field notes will be collected to determine the impact of the PLC on principal morale and isolation. Principals will be expected to attend the PLC meetings each month from March to June and participate in two individual interviews held at a time and location of their choosing. Assistant Principals and Lead Teachers will be surveyed during the intervention period to measure the impact of the intervention. After reading this consent form, you may elect to participate by signing at the bottom of the page indicating your agreement to participate.

How long with the research take?

The data collection period will extend from March 21, 2016 through June 27, 2016. Participants will agree to complete one survey per month from March through June. Each survey will take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete.

How will you use my information?

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data in this research. Only members of this research team will be allowed to inspect sections of the research records related to this study. The data from the study may be published but in all instances data will be pooled surveys and confidentiality will be assured. Answers will not be anonymous, but will be confidential. Data will be stored on a computer at Slate Elementary School in a locked office on a computer that is password protected.

Can I withdraw from the study if I decide to?

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or may discontinue participation AT ANY TIME, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may request to have the recording device turned off, decline to answer any question(s) or totally withdraw from the study by communicating your wishes to the investigator. The investigator has the right to withdraw you from the study AT ANY TIME. Your withdrawal from the study may be for reasons related solely to you or because the entire study has been terminated.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in the PLC beyond potential discomfort due to the discussion of sensitive topics such as the morale and isolating nature of the principalship. Some of the questions asked of you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break or stop your participation in this study at any time.

How will I benefit from taking part in the research?

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help in gathering insights which will be used to provide valuable information that could be used to design support for all principals in Rocky Top Public Schools and in other districts. An abstract of this research study will be made available to you upon request using either the email or phone number of the investigator who conducts your interview.

Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the research?

Contact me, Jennifer Griffin at 828-238-3424 (or jgriffin2@catamount.wcu.edu). You can also contact Dr. Ann Allen, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for the project, at 828-713-7325 (or alallen@email.wcu.edu). If you have concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, contact the chair of WCU's Institutional Review Board through the office of Research Administration at WCU (828-227-7212).

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I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY
AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

My signature below indicates my voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Informed Consent Form for Principal Significant Others

How Do We Take Care of Our Own?

Principal Support and Development in Rocky Top Public Schools

Introduction:

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that the following explanation of the proposed procedures be read and understood. It describes the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits to the study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

What is the purpose of this research?

Principals suffer from low morale and are isolated in their work. Research suggests that Professional Learning Communities (PLC) can effectively combat isolation and improve morale. As an intervention, principals new to buildings in Rocky Top Public Schools will participate in a professional learning community with an experienced mentor principal and data will be collected to determine if the PLC has an impact on morale and isolation.

What will be expected of me?

Interviews, surveys and field notes will be collected to determine the impact of the PLC on principal morale and isolation. Principals will be expected to attend the PLC meetings each month from March to June and participate in two individual interviews held at a time and location of their choosing. Significant others will be surveyed during the intervention period to measure the impact of the intervention. After reading this consent form, you may elect to participate by signing at the bottom of the page indicating your agreement to participate.

How long with the research take?

The data collection period will extend from March 21, 2016 through June 27, 2016. Participants will agree to complete one survey per month from March through June. Each survey will take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete.

How will you use my information?

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the data in this research. Only members of this research team will be allowed to inspect sections of the research records

related to this study. The data from the study may be published but in all instances data will be pooled surveys and confidentiality will be assured. Answers will not be anonymous, but will be confidential. Data will be stored on a computer at Slate Elementary School in a locked office on a computer that is password protected.

Can I withdraw from the study if I decide to?

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate, or may discontinue participation AT ANY TIME, without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may request to have the recording device turned off, decline to answer any question(s) or totally withdraw from the study by communicating your wishes to the investigator. The investigator has the right to withdraw you from the study AT ANY TIME. Your withdrawal from the study may be for reasons related solely to you or because the entire study has been terminated.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in the PLC beyond potential discomfort due to the discussion of sensitive topics such as the morale and isolating nature of the principalship. Some of the questions asked of you as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break or stop your participation in this study at any time.

How will I benefit from taking part in the research?

You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study, but your participation may help in gathering insights which will be used to provide valuable information that could be used to design support for all principals in Rocky Top Public Schools and in other districts. An abstract of this research study will be made available to you upon request using either the email or phone number of the investigator who conducts your interview.

Who should I contact if I have questions or concerns about the research?

Contact me, Jennifer Griffin at 828-238-3424 (or jgriffin2@catamount.wcu.edu). You can also contact Dr. Ann Allen, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for the project, at 828-713-7325 (or alallen@email.wcu.edu). If you have concerns about your treatment as a

participant in this study, contact the chair of WCU's Institutional Review Board through the office of Research Administration at WCU (828-227-7212).

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I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY
AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

My signature below indicates my voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix K: Initial Interview Questions for PLC Members

1. Share your name and briefly describe your experience in education.
2. How long have you been a principal?
3. Have you always wanted to be a principal?
4. How would you describe the role of principal to someone who was not in education?
5. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing principals?
6. What keeps you up at night? What do you worry about?
7. What type of professional development have you had as a principal that was specifically for principals?
8. What would you consider appropriate support for principals?
9. What do you anticipate as an outcome of the principal PLC?
10. What are your concerns about a principal PLC?

Appendix L: Final Interview Questions for PLC Members

1. Please share your name and school.
2. How would you describe the school year?
3. What were your biggest surprises?
4. Were the challenges you faced the ones you expected?
5. Reflecting on your school year, what will you do differently for next year?
6. What do you need to be most effective?
7. What is the best thing that happened this school year?
8. What benefits or drawbacks do you see from the experience in the PLC?
9. What type of support do you believe principals could benefit from?

Appendix M: Survey of Assistant Principals and Lead Teachers

1. What is today's data?
2. I would recommend Rocky Top Public Schools as a great place to work to my friends and colleagues.
3. I speak highly of the services provided by Rocky Top Public Schools.
4. My principal is able to focus on what is important in their school building.
5. I feel satisfied that my principal has the time to complete the duties required in their job.
6. I feel my principal's opinion is valued by Rocky Top Public Schools.
7. I feel my principal has the support to do their job.