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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Perceptions of School Administrators on the Role of Support Systems in Attrition Among
Principals and Assistant Principals

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Karina N. Gonzalez

November 2023

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Rev. Dr. Aaron Gonzalez. Thank you for your unwavering love and support. This journey has required a lot, and every step of the way, you have been my rock, my cheerleader, and my strength. I know that I can do anything I set my mind to because you remind me that I can. I appreciate and love you so very much.

To my sons, Nathaniel and Anthony, in all that I do and in everything that I endeavor, I hold you in my heart. You both inspire me to be better every day. Thank you for the hugs on days when I was tired and thank you for understanding when I had assignments to work on and papers to write. Always remember that with God, all things are possible. I love you both with all my heart.

To my mom and dad, the Rev. Francisco Campos and Rev. Alicia Campos, words cannot express how grateful I am for every sacrifice that you have made to get me to this point. I admire the courage it took for you to bring us to this country, leaving everything you knew behind to give us a chance to pursue something better. I hope that this accomplishment demonstrates how deeply I honor your sacrifice. *Los amo hasta la luna.*

Lastly, I dedicate this research study to the incredible educators, counselors, and school administrators that I have been privileged to work alongside in my 20 years of service in public education. Your passion, dedication, and perseverance leave me in awe. I am forever grateful for the indelible mark that you have each left on my life.

Above all, however, I thank God for granting me His strength and for the constant affirmation that I was on the right path. This would not have been possible without Him. To God be the glory! Great is His faithfulness indeed!

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Abstract

School administrators hold complex, varied, and challenging roles. As literature has suggested, these campus leaders must acquire a vast amount of information and knowledge during their formative years in leadership. Yet, the majority have reported that educational preparation programs do not adequately prepare them for the realities of their roles. Without purposeful, structured guidance, school administrators are left to navigate the complexities of their roles with little support or in isolation, which leads to exhaustion, burnout, and attrition. Attrition results in instability for teachers and students and has a financial impact for school districts. The district of study has experienced a high rate of school administrator turnover. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences were reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why attrition was happening, and whether levels of support were accelerating their departure. Current and former school administrators from the study district participated in semistructured interviews and a focus group. The interviews and focus group session were recorded and transcribed. Data were then coded, and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to construct six final themes. These themes included career progression, culture, essential characteristics and skills, nature of the work, relationship between principals and assistant principals, and support. The findings from this study revealed that there are specific, high-leverage support systems that school districts can implement and provide to help alleviate the challenges inherent to the school administrator role, to enhance the work that they carry out, and to mitigate attrition.

Keywords: attrition, school administrators, principal, assistant principal, support, school district, public education, educational leadership preparation program, leadership pipeline

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
List of Tables	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions	6
Definition of Key Terms	7
Summary	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review	10
Literature Search Methods	10
Self-Determination Theory	11
The Development of Self-Determination Theory	11
The Premises of Self-Determination Theory	12
Self-Determination Theory and the Work Environment	14
Self-Determination Theory and Attrition.....	15
Change Over Time and Future Directions	15
Additional Theoretical Considerations	16
The Role of the School Administrator	18
Teacher Support and Instructional Leadership	19
Student Achievement	21
Parental Engagement	22
School Safety	24
School Administrator Attrition	26
The Impact of Attrition	27
Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment	29
Self-Efficacy, Engagement, and Emotional Exhaustion.....	31
Educational Leadership Preparation Programs	33
University-Based Educational Leadership Preparation Programs	34
Alternative Educational Leadership Preparation Programs	35
Program Components and Professional Standards	36
Impact on Attrition.....	37
Advocates for Current Programs	38
Support Systems.....	40
Mentorships.....	40
Principal Pipeline Initiatives	41
Networking and Communities of Practice	42
Interdisciplinary Approaches	42
Leadership Coaching	43

Summary	44
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	47
Research Design.....	48
Research Method	50
Population	51
Study Sample	53
Materials/Instruments	54
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures.....	56
Data Analysis.....	57
Ethical Considerations	60
Trustworthiness.....	61
Assumptions.....	63
Limitations	64
Delimitations.....	64
Summary	65
Chapter 4: Results	67
Changes and Updates	68
Preparation of Raw Data for Analysis and Descriptive Data	68
Descriptive Data.....	69
Interview Data.....	71
Focus Group Data	73
Data Analysis Procedures for the Interviews and Focus Group	74
Phase 1 – Familiarization with the Data	74
Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes.....	75
Phase 3 – Searching for Themes.....	76
Phase 4 – Reviewing of Themes.....	77
Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes.....	80
Phase 6 – Producing the Report.....	86
Results.....	86
Research Question 1	87
Research Question 2	92
Research Question 3	96
Research Question 4	102
Summary	106
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	107
Discussion of the Findings.....	108
Research Question 1	108
Research Question 2	110
Research Question 3	114
Research Question 4	118
Recommendations for Practice	121

Recommendations for Future Studies	123
Conclusion	125
References.....	126
Appendix A: Interview Questions for Current School Administrators	142
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Former School Administrators	144
Appendix C: Questions for the Focus Group.....	147
Appendix D: Edits and Recommendations by the Expert Panel.....	148
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form.....	154
Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter	157
Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Letter	158
Appendix H: Site Permission to Conduct Study.....	159
Appendix I: Initial Codes.....	160
Appendix J: Secondary Codes	168
Appendix K: Secondary Codes/Categories and Initial Themes	169
Appendix L: Additional Sample Responses	170

List of Tables

Table 1. Descriptive Data for Current School Administrators	69
Table 2. Descriptive Data for Former School Administrators	70
Table 3. Descriptive Data for Focus Group Participants	70
Table 4. Data for Interview Sessions With Current School Administrators	72
Table 5. Data for Interview Sessions With Former School Administrators	72
Table 6. Data for Focus Group Session with Current and Former School Administrators.....	74
Table 7. Initial and Final Themes	79

Chapter 1: Introduction

The role of the U.S. school administrator is challenging and complex. These educational leaders are responsible for ensuring the academic success of students, supporting teachers, managing budgets, maintaining physical property, and fostering relationships with parents and the community, which makes their roles and responsibilities both vast and varied (Vaisben, 2018). As such, they are expected to acquire and process an extensive amount of knowledge and information within their first few years in the job. Consequently, nearly 40% of new school administrators report that they feel unprepared for their roles (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018) and 69% of principals report that educational leadership preparation programs are out of touch with the realities of leading a campus (Vaisben, 2018). If a school district offers little or no structured guidance, new administrators are left to navigate the complexities of their roles with minimal support or in isolation (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This leads new administrators to frequently feel overwhelmed, burned out, and in some cases, to leave the profession altogether (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Truong (2019) found that 25% of new administrators resign within the first 5 years, and when that occurs, the repercussions are felt both at the school district and campus level. At the school district level, the impact is felt in the time and money that must be invested to recruit, hire, and train new personnel. At the campus level, the impact is far more costly. Administrator attrition results in instability for teachers and students. This is notable because administrator stability is a critical component for school improvement (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Raskin et al. (2015) posited that building leadership capacity within campus administrators results in confident and competent leaders who drive positive outcomes for students. This implies that a well-equipped school leader is one who is able to guide the instructional focus of teachers to

meet the needs of all learners. Hence, attrition and the resulting instability may lead to schools that struggle to produce academic success for their students.

Within the field of educational administration, leadership and management intersect (Vaisben, 2018). As leaders, administrators set the course and direction for a campus, and as managers, they direct how goals will be reached. Therefore, school administrators need preparation in both of those areas in order to feel competent and confident in their role. However, the level of training that school administrators receive in educational leadership preparation programs is often insufficient for meeting those needs. In fact, out of the hundreds of preparation programs available for administrators nationwide, there are no standard recommendations for methodologies or content (Vaisben, 2018). Some programs stress mentoring (Hildreth et al., 2018), coaching (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), or internships (Markson, 2018), while others suggest that collaborative partnerships between districts and universities lead to better results and advanced skills (Boyle et al., 2016). This indicates that there may be a lack of consistency in how school administrators are prepared via educational leadership preparation programs. Furthermore, many school districts do not prepare administrators for the complex challenges that they face after they have been hired (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Oftentimes, school administrators are expected to operate and function using only the skills acquired in their preparation programs or prior leadership experience. If both management and leadership skills are not explicitly taught, administrators may lack the policy, professional, and administrative capacity necessary to feel competent and perform effectively in their roles.

Once hired, new school administrators need support as they navigate the challenges of their demanding roles. Gimbel and Kefor (2018) asserted that new administrators benefit from having an experienced mentor to guide them and to provide consistent support through

discussion, collaboration, and reflection. Yet, as Gimbel and Kefor (2018) noted, many new administrators do not have consistent access to a mentor. Another perspective in the research posits that school administrators benefit from creating networks of support through their peers and professional communities of practice (Bowers, 2017). In fact, nearly 28% of administrators stated that having a professional network of educational leaders contributed to their willingness to remain in administration in spite of the challenges (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Regardless of the approach, the existing research endorses both the need for, and benefit of, providing administrators a support system to lean on. School districts that do not make this a priority may struggle to retain talented administrators and fail to drive improvement in school achievement and performance.

Within the last 3 years, 14 school administrators have resigned or left Study Independent School District (pseudonym), which is located in a major metropolitan Texas city, to pursue careers in other fields and organizations. For an educational community comprised of only 19 campuses serving approximately 13,800 students, this level of attrition is concerning because it represents a turnover rate of approximately 32%. In speaking to administrators, a recurring theme is a lack of preparation and lack of ongoing support for those in leadership roles (P. C., personal communication, January 2019; J. E., personal communication, November 2020; A. G., personal communication, May 2018). School administrators face daunting challenges on a daily basis, and the nature of educational leadership is complex, requiring skills in management, policy, leadership, and administration (Vaisben, 2018). Yet, principals assert that training received through educational leadership preparation programs is insufficient for the tasks involved in leading a campus (Campanotta et al., 2018).

Without additional support and guidance, administrators may adopt a disconnected, trial-and-error approach as they attempt to reconcile job expectations and task proficiency (Truong, 2019). Such an approach results in administrators who are overwhelmed, burned out, or who pursue careers elsewhere (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). As administrators leave the profession, there are serious negative implications for the educational community. School administrators are instructional leaders on whom teachers rely, and when that instructional leadership is inconsistent due to resignations or high mobility, campus success and student outcomes are directly impacted (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

A lack of robust and comprehensive leadership preparation and insufficient support negatively impact school administrator retention (Truong, 2019). This is important because high attrition and instability in leadership have a negative effect on school achievement (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). In order to retain talented leaders who can facilitate positive outcomes for students and teachers, school districts must equip and support school administrators to meet the challenges of leading a campus. However, there are many different means of support. Some researchers recommend mentoring (Hildreth et al., 2018), while others stress the importance of coaching (Hayes & Burkett, 2021), management training (Vaisben, 2018), or internships (Markson, 2018). Thus, school districts face a daunting challenge: understanding the needs of their school administrators, sorting through a multitude of options, and then selecting support practices that are focused, sustainable, and which mitigate the impact of attrition. Taking on such an endeavor is not easy.

Study Independent School District (SISD; pseudonym) is located within a major metropolitan area in Texas. Its nearly two dozen campuses serve approximately 14,000 students

in both urban communities and rural areas. According to the most recent data provided by the Texas Education Agency (n.d.-a), approximately 90% of students are Hispanic and nearly all are identified as economically disadvantaged. The school district's four-year graduation rate is above the state average of 90% (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). The performance level data from the 2020–2021 academic school year indicates that overall, in all grades and subjects tested, 67% of students obtained satisfactory achievement on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, also known as the STAAR (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). This represents an 11-point drop when compared to pre-COVID scores (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b).

It is important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the field of education and on the role of school administrators. As schools closed to mitigate the spread of the virus, the way in which students were educated was disrupted (Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020). Throughout the span of this crisis, school administrators were tasked with following evolving guidelines and creating a safe environment for learning (Venketsamy & Hu, 2022) while working remotely or detached from students, teachers, and parents (Harris & Jones, 2020). In spite of the uncertainty, school administrators had to remain steady leaders, often with a lack of support, capacity, and training (Kafa, 2021). In essence, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted student learning and may have highlighted the need for focused and targeted support for educational leaders.

Currently, SISD does not have a structured leadership academy or a pipeline to prepare prospective administrators for the unique challenges of leading a campus, nor are there focused, built-in systems in place to support, guide, and nurture them. New administrators enter the profession relying solely on the knowledge and skills acquired in university-based preparation programs or previous leadership experience. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study was

that school administrators are leaving the district at a high rate, and there is no clear indication as to why this is happening and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. Understanding the underlying causes of this attrition may provide a foundation for developing focused and structured systems of support that may lead to increased administrator retention both in SISD and in other school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why attrition is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. This was accomplished by conducting semistructured interviews of current and former school administrators as well as through the use of a focus group. Many school districts do not have the personnel, financial resources, or time necessary to develop extensive, in-depth leadership pipelines, which include preservice preparation, induction, and on-going professional development (Gates et al., 2019; Gordon, 2020). However, systems of support based on best practices may be more easily implemented. Thus, understanding the causes that school administrators report may lead to attrition, and recommending effective ways to support new school administrators based on their unique needs, may directly benefit school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

Research Questions

RQ1: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

RQ2: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

RQ3: How do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district describe the factors that contribute to attrition?

RQ4: What systems of support do K-12 school administrators in the study district perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities?

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are provided to help the reader better understand terms related to the focus and purpose of this study:

Educational leadership preparation program. An educational leadership preparation program is a program designed to prepare, equip, and develop school leaders to lead a K-12 campus and positively influence school improvement and student learning (Swann et al., 2021). Within such programs, core features may include curriculum, cohort format, clinical experiences, university-district partnerships, and student recruitment (Swann et al., 2021). Broad content areas may include school improvement, social justice, school-community collaboration, ethical conduct, laws, policy, and governance (Gordon, 2020).

Leadership pipeline. A leadership pipeline is a purposeful, often multi-step or multi-phase approach geared toward the development of future school leaders. It may include elements such as teacher expertise and experience, acceptance into and completion of a leadership preparation program, licensure, campus leadership induction and experience, as well as professional development (Gordon, 2020).

Professional community of practice. A professional community of practice is a group of people associated through a profession who engage and interact regularly in ways that are intended to lead to individual, group, and organizational improvement and learning (Swann et al., 2021).

School administrator. A school administrator is an educational leader, such as an assistant principal, vice-principal, or principal, responsible for ensuring the academic success of students, supporting teachers, fostering relationships with parents and the community, as well as the management of staff and various aspects of maintaining a physical school building (Vaisben, 2018).

Summary

School administrators face broad and complex challenges which demand that they acquire and process vast amounts of knowledge, information, and skills from the onset of their leadership careers (Vaisben, 2018). Often, however, these leaders receive minimal support from their school districts, which results in them feeling unprepared and overwhelmed as they navigate the complexities of their roles (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This may also drive attrition (Truong, 2019). The introduction for this study provided initial insight regarding the gaps that exist between the expectations and realities of the role of school administrators and the state of current educational leadership preparation programs. It also addressed how those factors are impacting attrition and resulting in instability for teachers and students, a critical component for school improvement and student outcomes (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Raskin et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of school administrators at Study Independent School District to better understand the factors that are influencing attrition within the district.

The review of the literature in Chapter 2 will address the underlying theoretical framework and provide an in-depth review of current educational leadership preparation programs and systems of support for school administrators. The chapter will also focus on

insight for understanding how an inability to address and provide support is impacting school administrators and potentially driving attrition.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the theoretical foundation regarding how individuals are motivated to persevere, make sense of the roles that they hold, and relate to their organizations. These topics align to the research questions developed for this study. The literature review provides insight into understanding the role of the school administrator, the impact that they have on multiple audiences, and the complex nature of attrition. Furthermore, research studies that highlight current models, gaps, and aspirational elements of educational leadership preparation programs and systems of support will be discussed. Most importantly, this review of the literature will address current practices as a foundation for understanding factors that may help mitigate attrition among school administrators.

Literature Search Methods

The literature review for this study addresses and is divided into five major sections: the theoretical framework, the role of the school administrator, the complex nature of attrition, educational leadership programs, and systems of support. Although this dissertation research focuses attrition, it is important to promote an understanding of the content by examining the theoretical framework underlying how people relate to their work, along with providing detailed insight into factors that may drive or mitigate turnover. Utilizing Abilene Christian University's online library, the following databases were used to search for articles dated from 2017-2022 on the topics addressed in this literature review: ACU OneSearch, ProQuest, EBSCO, and ERIC. The following key terms were used to conduct the search: *school administrators, attrition, role and responsibilities of the school administrator, educational leadership preparation programs, and school district systems of support.*

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) helped form the conceptual framework for this study. According to Deci et al. (2017), SDT is a theory of motivation based on the premise that everyone has a basic psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When employees perceive that these basic needs are being met, and when organizations are purposeful in facilitating them, the result is employees who exhibit psychological wellness, physical wellness, enhanced performance, and autonomous motivation (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). The following section focuses on the background for SDT and an overview of its basic elements and premises. Different ways in which the theory has changed over time and the future of research using SDT are also examined. Finally, this section addresses additional theories that were considered in lieu of SDT as a framework for this proposed study.

The Development of Self-Determination Theory

The concept of self-determination was first introduced by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985 (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Their work began with experimental studies of the effects of events on individuals' intrinsic motivation. However, they discovered that existing theories on drive and instinct did not adequately describe the phenomena observed. Thus, building on the works of psychodynamic psychologists such as Freud, White, Hullian and Hartmann, and integrating the findings of empirical psychologists such as Tolman and Lewin, they developed a new definition of intrinsic motivation. Their work resulted in the assertion that humans have a need for self-determination, competence, and enjoyment, and that these needs motivate them to engage in an ongoing interaction between seeking and overcoming challenges. In essence, their research led them to develop a theory which focused on basic human needs, the ways in which

those needs are satisfied and expressed, and how various forces impact functioning, energy, direction, and wellness of individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The Premises of Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of human behavior and personality development that seeks to examine the social conditions that either facilitate or hinder an individual's ability to flourish within their environment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is focused primarily on the psychological level and analyzes how social, biological, and cultural conditions enhance or undermine innate capacity for psychological engagement, growth, and wellness. The authors stated that this focus on flourishing and wellness, as well as the factors that support or thwart them, are of great importance within SDT because they facilitate understanding of what individuals truly need from their social and psychological environments in order to function at optimal levels and thrive. In addition to being concerned with the functioning and nature of individuals, SDT seeks to understand how people engage, interpret, and act upon and with their environment and context (Deci et al., 2017). This can drive individuals to either take interest, seek challenges, and strive or to disconnect, disengage, and respond with apathy (Guay, 2022).

Basic Psychological Needs. SDT puts emphasis on the basic psychological needs, and it specifically centers on three: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017).

Autonomy describes a sense of voluntrariness and is defined as the need to self-regulate actions and experiences instead of being regulated by external forces (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is also demonstrated as a form of congruence between behaviors, values, and interests. Competence refers to the need to feel mastery and have the capacity to complete tasks (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021), and it is evidenced by behaviors such as striving, curiosity, and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A feeling of social connectedness characterizes the basic need for relatedness (Van den

Broeck et al., 2016). It also describes a feeling of belonging, of significance within the social structure, and of being cared for by others (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021). These needs are essential for growth, development, well-being, and motivation. Unlike other theories, SDT premises that these needs vary by the extent to which their environments facilitate meeting them, not necessarily by the extent to which people possess them (Szulawski et al., 2021). Thus, organizations play an important role in meeting these basic psychological needs (Gagné et al., 2022).

Motivation. Autonomous motivation consists of both intrinsic motivation and well-internalized extrinsic motivation (Good et al., 2022). It is a key variable in SDT because it predicts wellness and workplace outcomes (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Even in highly demanding jobs, such as those of school administrators, autonomous motivation leads to less burnout, work exhaustion, and turnover (Fernet et al., 2010, 2012). It also increases job satisfaction, work commitment, productivity, and performance, and it is predictive of knowledge sharing (Szulawski et al., 2021). This aligns closely to heutagogy, where growth is learner-driven, learner-centered, and focused on competency (Geer, 2020). When individuals understand the purpose and worth of their jobs, feel autonomous and confident in their ability to carry out their responsibilities, and receive clear feedback and support, they become employees who learn, grow, perform better, and are better adjusted (Deci et al., 2017).

Autonomous forms of motivation are also important because they are predictors of overall well-being at work and show positive outcomes, even in non-individualistic cultures (Deci et al., 2017). These forms of motivation are also systematically related to leadership styles, work conditions, job design, and pay. A key variable that leads to more autonomous motivation is high perceived levels of support from leaders (Nie et al., 2015). This support is defined as empowerment, relatedness, and acknowledgement of perspectives (Deci et al., 2017). Therefore,

leaders can successfully facilitate autonomous motivation in their employees by acknowledging perspectives, offering choice about how to enact ideas, and by refraining from pressuring behaviors and language. Thus, competence, autonomy, relatedness, and autonomous motivation are key concepts that can help guide the creation of practices, policies, and environments that promote performance and wellness (Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

Self-Determination Theory and the Work Environment

Work is one of the most dominant areas of adult life (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is not only a means of earning money to survive, but also serves as an important part of how humans experience self and find collective realization. Yet, the experience of work, as perceived by individuals, can be quite varied. For some, the experience is fulfilling, meaningful, and engaging, while for others, work can be burdensome, draining, and even toxic. For any work organization, the goal should be to provide employees with an engaging environment that drives motivation, but that requires intentionally fostering conditions to meet workers' needs (Gagné et al., 2022). This begins with the organization's leaders. In their research on work, wellness, and productivity, Ryan and Deci (2017) found that when managers support autonomy, employees internalize the value of their efforts and work. This leads to higher motivation, job satisfaction, and well-being. What is interesting to note is that managerial support for autonomy predicted satisfaction and motivation better than pay. Related research supports the assertion that by satisfying individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, their employees' sense of purpose, commitment, engagement is enhanced (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

These findings are important within the scope of this study for two reasons. First, administrators are often the highest paid individuals on a campus, yet many are still making the

choice to leave the profession. This may indicate that a school district's inability to meet the basic psychological needs of school administrators is overriding the incentive of higher salaries. Second, it provides critical implications for school district leaders. For instance, if commitment is enhanced when basic psychological needs are met, then by nurturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, school districts may be able to prevent the departure of campus administrators.

Self-Determination Theory and Attrition

Self-determination theory may help illuminate factors impacting school administrator attrition rates in two ways. The first is through the understanding of how the basic psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness impact job satisfaction. If school administrators perceive that they are not competent or well prepared for their complex roles, it may make them feel less autonomous and less motivated, factors that Deci et al. (2017) stated are critical to mitigating burnout, exhaustion, and turnover in highly demanding roles. Second, if school districts do not foster competence, autonomy, and relatedness through their practices, school administrators may perceive this gap in professional development and training as a lack of support from district leadership. Perceived support from leadership facilitates autonomous motivation, and autonomous motivation is a predictor of well-being at work (Van den Broeck et al., 2016, 2021). Therefore, if a school district is not purposeful about meeting the basic psychological needs as premised by SDT, then job satisfaction, well-being, and autonomous motivation may decrease, leading to higher attrition rates among school administrators.

Change Over Time and Future Directions

Since its introduction in 1985, SDT has slowly evolved and expanded to include six mini-theories. These are cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, causality integration theory, causality orientations theory, basic psychological needs theory, goal contents

theory, and relationships motivation theory (Sheldon & Prentice, 2019). Each is a slight variation of SDT, with the primary difference being the focus of the theory. Cognitive evaluation theory, for instance, focuses on the role of intrinsic motivation while organismic integration expands on the concept of extrinsic motivation. Although time and additional research have led to the extension of SDT, Ryan and Deci (2017) asserted there is still much room for expansion. One area that is incomplete is research on personal change and responsibility, and more specifically, on an exploration of the capacity, mechanisms, experiences, and conditions necessary for individuals to become self-aware and motivated to create change. There is also a need to better understand what the authors refer to as self-as-process, which is described as how individuals develop and maintain an inner compass. Lastly, there is much work still needed in multiple areas, primarily those centered around education. These include research into the neuropsychology of autonomy, methods for assessing motivation, the role of technology within modern education, motivation in learning contexts, and globalization and diversity (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Consequently, SDT is a theory in the midst of continual evolution and expansion.

Additional Theoretical Considerations

An approach that was considered, but ultimately not used as a conceptual framework is sensemaking theory. Sensemaking describes the process through which individuals engage prior knowledge and experiences to make sense of or navigate ambiguous situations (Brown et al., 2015). When individuals attempt to interpret a situation to make sense of what is transpiring, they activate previous knowledge, experiences, and contexts (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking theory is especially useful when the goal is to better understand the way in which individuals make sense of the work that they do on a daily basis (Brown et al., 2015). It is also instrumental when researchers seek to explore the way in which individuals make sense of the

past or present (Brown et al., 2015). While sensemaking theory offers a sound conceptual framework for attrition, it did not align with the purpose of this research as well as SDT.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in attrition rates, to form a better understanding as to why turnover is occurring, and to gauge whether current levels of support are accelerating departures. The purpose was not simply to explore how school administrators perceive and make sense of their work and what is happening within it. Additionally, the study was not geared toward exploring how school administrators make sense of their past or present. Rather, the purpose of this study was to gain deeper insight into the complex, multi-faceted nature of the factors driving attrition and whether systems of support are serving as protective factors or hindering retention. By exploring how autonomy, connectedness, relatedness, and motivation are influencing turnover, clearer understanding of the phenomena may be achieved. Furthermore, these factors are an important part of this study because if school administrators perceive that they are not competent or well prepared for their complex roles, it may indicate that their basic psychological needs are not being met. This, in turn, may make them feel less motivated to remain in their positions. SDT better allowed for exploration of the specific factors that Deci et al. (2017) asserted are critical to mitigating burnout, exhaustion, and turnover in highly challenging roles. For these reasons, SDT was better suited to frame the concept of attrition as presented in this study.

Deci and Ryan (1985) developed SDT as a theory of motivation and asserted that every individual has a basic psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. If these needs are met, individuals are better able to achieve psychological wellness, physical wellness, enhanced performance, and autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Organizations play a

key role in meeting basic psychological needs and fostering motivation (Gagné et al., 2022). For instance, an organization can provide opportunities for growth and foster feelings of belonging to facilitate autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Szulawski et al., 2021). Organizations can also enhance autonomous motivation by creating practices and policies that acknowledge perspectives and refrain from toxic behaviors and language (Deci et al., 2017). SDT also facilitates understanding of how all of these factors, and an organization's ability to help its members meet their needs, impact attrition. Over time, SDT has expanded to include six mini-theories, including cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, causality integration theory, causality orientations theory, basic psychological needs theory, goal contents theory, and relationships motivation theory (Sheldon & Prentice, 2019), and with its continued expansion and use, it is likely that additional insight, and possibly even theories, will be added in the future. Lastly, it is important to note that after exploring other theories, including sensemaking theory, self-determination theory was best suited to provide a robust and sound framework for the exploration of attrition among school administrators.

The Role of the School Administrator

School administrators face daunting challenges on a daily basis. Among them are managing staff, ensuring the academic success of students, maintaining relationships with parents, and overseeing physical property. In areas of high diversity or with large minority populations, school administrators must also exhibit competency in multicultural issues and promote equity (Rodríguez et al., 2016). This leads to roles and responsibilities that are demanding, expansive, and varied (Vaisben, 2018). Yet, school leaders often begin their journeys with limited experience. This translates to a population of leaders who are expected to process expansive amounts of information and acquire a critical array of skills within their first

few years. Too often, however, school districts do not provide sufficient preparation or support for administrators to meet the complex challenges that their roles entail (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). A lack of preparation leads to the shock of what Wieczorek and Manard (2018) referred to as a trial-and-error phenomenon. It also leads to a disconnect between the duties that administrators are expected to perform and those that they have been actually trained to do (Jiang et al., 2018). These gaps in skillset can lead school administrators to feel overwhelmed, incompetent, and to ultimately pursue careers outside of education (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

School administrators are educational leaders responsible for supporting teachers, ensuring the academic success of students, fostering relationships with parents, as well as managing and maintaining the safety and security of a physical school building and the individuals within it (Vaisben, 2018). As such, the work that they are tasked with carrying out is broad and varied. A school administrator may hold the title of assistant principal, vice-principal, or principal (Vaisben, 2018), but regardless of title, the work of a school administrator is multifaceted and increasingly complex (Reid, 2021). This literature review addressed the multifaceted nature of the role of school administrators. It also focused on the complex nature of attrition and the ways in which educational leadership preparation programs and systems of support impact attrition. The following section is an examination of the role of school administrators in four primary areas: teacher support and instructional leadership, student achievement, parental engagement, and school safety.

Teacher Support and Instructional Leadership

A primary role of a school administrator is that of evaluator and developer of teachers. School administrators are instructional leaders, and as such, they are expected to engage in the learning and teaching that takes place on their campuses (Neumerski et al., 2018). Instructional

leadership is a multifaceted term used to describe the way in which a school administrator manages the instructional program, promotes a positive learning climate, sets goals, crafts a vision, develops academic processes, drives curriculum, and builds teacher capacity (Skaalvik, 2020). This means that as an instructional leader, a key function of a school administrator is to build teacher capacity, enhance skill sets, and equip staff to meet the needs of all students (Hallinger et al., 2018). Doing so requires that they make data-informed decisions about how to support teachers, provide targeted professional development, and utilize available staff, such as instructional coaches, to assist with the development of teachers in specific practice areas (McBrayer et al., 2020).

Even though instructional leadership encompasses many functions and has long been an expectation of the role, school administrators are largely expected to determine how to become instructional leaders independently, and guidance about how to carry out this function has not always been specific, detailed, or clearly delineated (Neumerski et al., 2018). This could be why school administrators report spending less than 13% of their time on activities related to instructional leadership (Neumerski et al., 2018). These findings are concerning for two reasons. The first is that the quality of instructional leadership driven by a school administrator determines student learning outcomes (Asiyai, 2021), partly because effective instructional leadership results in improved teaching practices (Manaseh, 2016). This translates to enhanced school improvement. The second is that not devoting adequate time to the development and support of teachers can lead to lower visibility of the instructional leader, a factor that drives the deterioration of relationships with teachers and increases the stress and likelihood of burnout among school administrators (Neumerski et al., 2018).

Further complicating the role that school administrators play in the support and development of teachers is the shift toward addressing needs beyond the scope of professional development and instructional guidance. Current research indicates that principals see their role of supporting teachers evolving in the future as the emphasis on mental and emotional health increases (Reid, 2021). This poses additional challenges for school administrators because the focus of educational leadership preparation programs is on analyzing student achievement data or evaluating teacher performance, not necessarily on ways to meet their staff's mental health needs (Reid, 2021). Such a shift may result in the need for school administrators to develop an entirely new and different skill set. Furthermore, as the emphasis on mental and emotional health increases, school administrators will need training, support, and guidance on how to engage in and approach difficult conversations with teachers, in particular as they pertain to areas of instructional weaknesses or opportunities for growth (Neumerski et al., 2018). This will place additional demands on school administrators and may exacerbate burnout and attrition.

Student Achievement

Another critical function of the school administrator is to drive the academic achievement of students. Gimbel and Kefor (2018) asserted that effective school administrators help drive achievement within a campus and positively impact learning and teaching. Research findings indicate that school administrators account for approximately one-quarter of a campus' variation in student achievement (Boyle et al., 2016; Corcoran, 2017). Highly effective school administrators can raise achievement of students by two to seven months within a single school year (Corcoran, 2017), supporting Çetin et al.'s (2021) claim that a school administrator's effect on the success of educational activities on a campus is undeniable. Effective leaders have an even greater impact on schools with the greatest needs, such as those with a high number of poor

students (Boyle et al., 2016). Quiñones and FitzGerald (2019) stated that school administrators play critical roles in promoting academic excellence and equity and in shaping the educational experiences of Latinx students, and Crawford et al. (2018) posited that school administrators can build capacity and negotiate relational tensions in their educators to better support undocumented students and increase educational access. An effective school administrator can also support the education of Black and Latinx students in underserved and under resourced schools by adopting an antiracist stance, cultivating relationships, navigating political climates, and offering a counter story to the discourse surrounding failure in such schools (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

These examples help illustrate the skills that an effective school leader should possess and provide evidence of how increasing leadership effectiveness can lead to student success (Boyle et al., 2016). For these reasons, Hallam and Boren (2019) posited that campus leadership is second only to teacher impact when it comes to student learning. This is echoed by Luschei and Jeong's (2021) assertions that school administrators help drive positive student achievement by supporting innovation, empowering teachers, and increasing job satisfaction and motivation. Student achievement, therefore, hinges on the effectiveness of school administrators. Hence, the need for effective school administrators who can elevate student achievement serves as an impetus for closely evaluating the quality of educational leadership preparation programs, systems of support, and attrition (Corcoran, 2017).

Parental Engagement

School administrators are tasked with fostering and maintaining relationships with parents to promote school engagement. Engagement in this context refers to the purposeful efforts and interactions between schools and families that help support the overall development of children (Smith et al., 2021). When families are engaged in the education of their children,

there are academic, social, and behavioral benefits for the student (Reinke et al., 2019), and increased school participation results in improved academic outcomes (Jasis, 2021). While teachers are the primary drivers of such engagement, school administrators also play a critical role (Reinke et al., 2019). For instance, a school administrator can facilitate parental engagement by communicating expectations for involvement, developing policies that foster participation, and by creating a culture conducive to promoting bonds between the school and home (Reinke et al., 2019). School administrators can also help develop partnerships through their leadership practices. Smith et al. (2021) noted that when parents view school administrators as welcoming, approachable, and accessible, engagement is easier to develop. Similarly, when teachers feel supported, communication regarding expectations is clear, and evaluations are meaningful, effective partnerships between the school and home can be strengthened, thus increasing parental engagement. Hence, school administrators who exhibit leadership skills, develop trusting relationships, and create a sense of community are more likely to increase parental engagement, thereby promoting student achievement.

It is also important to note that in recent years, the influence of parents and guardians in schools has increased (Reid, 2021). Many are asking to have a say or decision-making authority in school operations, structure, policy, and even funding. Others are driven to participate more fully to promote inclusivity, equity, and activism (Jasis, 2021). This is especially true in underserved communities or in areas where exclusionary policies exist. In response, some school administrators have implemented practices such as the creation of a parental advisory group or round table (Reid, 2021). Beyond engagement and advocacy, however, school administrators also must build relationships with parents to help their schools thrive in an era of increasing competition. Kotok et al. (2021) stated that today's parents have more choices regarding where

to enroll their children. With the advent of charter schools, traditional public schools are no longer the only option. As a result, school administrators are expected to develop strategies to attract and retain students. These strategies include marketing, branding, and community outreach, skills which receive very little focus within educational leadership preparation program courses. Thus, school administrators are having to adapt by acquiring skill in external communications, interactions, and cultural competency and sensitivity rather than strictly on the internal management of staff and students (Jasis, 2021; Reid, 2021).

School Safety

School administrators play a key role in school safety (Brown et al., 2022) and place a strong emphasis on safety and security as elements of their roles (Reid, 2021). While safety has historically been a focal point for school administrators, the proliferation of shootings on school campuses within the United States has further highlighted the need to enhance and prioritize this function (Reid, 2021). It has also made their jobs more complex. As concern regarding school shootings has increased, school administrators have had to respond by holding meetings and elevating the level of discourse with parents and staff to address questions and articulate plans for mitigation and response to school violence. They must evaluate budgets and allocate funds to install security equipment and increase awareness of security-related tasks. School safety has also resulted in the need for school administrators to develop and sustain emergency management and school safety plans (Lopez et al., 2020) and at times, to hire or manage school resource officers (Lopez, 2019). Additionally, they are tasked with conducting safety drills to prepare for multiple scenarios (Lopez et al., 2020), including fire drills, natural disaster drills, and school shooting drills.

These safety related functions require establishing interagency relationships with law enforcement personnel and first responders (Lopez et al., 2020). Such collaboration necessitates a unique skill set which includes an ability to communicate clearly, to work with multiple stakeholders, to establish common goals, and to manage conflicting viewpoints and priorities to facilitate understanding of varied organizational structures and roles. In other words, a school administrator must be able to bring together law enforcement personnel, first responders, teachers, parents, and even students in such a way that missions, visions, perspectives, policies, and procedures can align. That is no small feat. Yet, Lopez (2019) noted that despite the tremendous responsibility that school administrators have when it comes to the safety of their students and staff, many lack the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and implement emergency management and safety plans on their own. Therefore, it is imperative that they be provided support to help them navigate this arduous responsibility.

Evolving school safety and security concerns also mean that school administrators have to become increasingly proficient on a broad range of legal issues. For instance, every state has established statutes aimed at preventing bullying on campus (Brown et al., 2022). Oftentimes, however, statutes lack specificity, making prevention, intervention, and implementation of policies at the district and campus level challenging (Brown et al., 2022). There are also laws that have been passed to address school shootings and gun safety. In some states, personnel can be armed, including school administrators and teachers (Chrusciel et al., 2015). At the federal level, legislation, such as the Secure Communities and Safe Schools Act (2019), is often reauthorized and amended, leading to changes in policy or budget allocations. To remain in compliance, school administrators must remain abreast of such changes. To do so, school districts must be able to provide targeted legal support.

With the complex and multifaceted challenges associated with the role of the school administrator, it is no surprise that many have contemplated leaving the profession prior to retirement age (Reid, 2021). The ever-evolving job-related demands, increasing time commitment, and rigorous expectations placed on them to carry out the functions of their roles are personally taxing, often taking a toll on their family life and personal emotional well-being. The scope of their work can seem unsustainable, leading to burnout (Reid, 2021). Thus, evolving job expectations have the potential to increase burnout and may shape decisions that school administrators make about their employment, resulting in higher attrition rates.

School administrators have challenging roles, and this section addressed four critical aspects of their work: teachers support, student achievement, parental engagement, and school safety. As instructional leaders, school administrators evaluate, support, and develop teachers while simultaneously fostering positive learning climates, casting vision, and setting academic goals. They are also tasked with driving student academic achievement and nurturing and promoting parental engagement. Additionally, school administrators must account for the safety and security of every individual who sets foot on school property. Often, these leaders are left to learn and navigate the varied and vast functions of their roles independently. It is for this reason that school districts must consider the inherent challenges faced by school administrators within the scope of their work, analyze gaps that may exist between theory and practice, and be purposeful in finding ways to support them as they carry out the demanding work before them. Failure to do so may drive attrition among this group of educational leaders.

School Administrator Attrition

Although the role of the school administrator is critical for student achievement, teacher development, parental engagement, and school safety, there is significant turnover and instability

among this group of leaders (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). It is estimated that on a yearly basis, roughly 25% of school administrators leave their campuses (Truong, 2019). Turnover and mobility rates are even higher in urban school districts (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021), and in communities of high poverty, attrition can range from 30% to 50% (Truong, 2019). On average, schools experience transition to a new school administrator every 3 to 4 years (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). That means that a school can have as many as three different school administrators within a decade. This level of turnover has an impact and comes at a high cost. Teachers rely on their campus administrators for instructional leadership. When instructional leadership is inconsistent, as occurs when administrators transfer or resign, the stability of the campus is affected, and this, in turn, impacts school improvement and student success (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This section addresses the impact of attrition. It also focuses on ways in which job satisfaction, organizational commitment, self-efficacy, engagement, and emotional exhaustion influence attrition among school administrators.

The Impact of Attrition

School administrators have an impact on student outcomes, achievement, graduation rates, and attendance (Reid, 2021). They are imperative leaders for school success because they help create the conditions necessary for student learning by fostering intellectual development and positive interactions (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). As such, they are second only to teachers when it comes to influencing student success (Liu & Bellibas, 2018; Reid, 2021). Because of this, school administrator turnover disrupts student learning and efforts toward school improvement. Furthermore, since attrition rates are higher in schools with students of low socio-economic status (Truong, 2019), campuses and students in need of the most support are disproportionately affected, perpetuating cycles of stagnation or driving decreases in student achievement.

Tekleselassie and Choi (2021) asserted that the effect that a school administrator has on student growth increases over time and that sustainable growth and change requires at least 5 to 7 nine years. Therefore, early departure and high turnover amongst school administrators weakens educational gains and decreases the likelihood of long-term achievement.

The stability of the school administrator also directly impacts teacher attrition. School administrator turnover affects staff morale, satisfaction, and commitment, and this results in higher teacher turnover (Reid, 2021; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2022) found that in schools that experience high leadership turnover, teacher turnover spikes as well. The effects of this phenomenon are even greater under certain campus conditions, including schools with high poverty rates, those in urban areas, when teacher experience is already low, and in schools that have chronic school administrator turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2022). In other words, as school administrators leave, so do teachers, and as that occurs, student achievement is further affected (Player et al., 2017), and this impacts high needs campuses disproportionately (DeMatthews et al., 2022). Consequently, administrator attrition is a multi-layered challenge that leads to unstable instructional leadership and a decrease in school achievement.

School administrator turnover also has implications for school districts. As previously stated, school administrator attrition influences student achievement and teacher turnover (Reid, 2021). Both student achievement and teacher attrition rates are analyzed and examined by state education agencies when assigning accountability ratings to school districts (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). Thus, a school district's accountability rating may suffer as a result of the impact of school administrator attrition. Additionally, as teachers and school administrators leave the district, undue burden is placed on its human resources departments and remaining leaders to

recruit, hire, onboard, train, and equip new staff. Such efforts have a financial impact on the school district, with some estimates placing the cost of every school administrator who leaves at approximately \$75,000 (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). Therefore, attrition among school administrators may have both educational and financial repercussions.

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

School administrator turnover creates instability, and that can interrupt or even completely terminate progress toward meeting school goals and living out their missions (Reid, 2021). Therefore, retaining school administrators is a fundamental part of ensuring school success and student achievement. Even so, nearly 75% of school administrators express that their roles have become increasingly complicated, and this may be driving historically high attrition rates, with as many as 33% of school administrators indicating that they are likely to leave the profession within the next 5 years (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). This creates challenges for school districts on multiple fronts. First, there is a financial impact resulting from the cost and labor necessary to recruit and onboard new school administrators to fill vacancies. It is estimated that on average, a departing school administrator costs school districts approximately \$75,000 (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). Second, high attrition rates among school leaders leads to increased teacher attrition and decreased student achievement, and the impact is even more notable in schools that are low performing or that have large percentages of minority students (DeMatthews et al., 2022), as is the case in SISD (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a) and many other districts like it.

For that reason, Liu and Bellibas (2018) posited that it is critically important to ascertain school administrators' attitudes toward their roles prior to their departure from the profession. Yet, the topic of how job satisfaction and organizational commitment impact attrition among

school leaders is often overlooked, with emphasis being placed on teacher attrition instead. Job satisfaction is the positive emotional state that results from an individual's job experience, an awareness of how the role fulfills values, as well as the perceptions and expectations that one has about the role (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). Thus, job satisfaction has both affective and cognitive components. Organizational commitment refers to a person's psychological attachment to an organization and its goals, values, and success (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). The authors asserted that both job satisfaction and organizational commitment have substantial implications for organizations because of their inverse effect on turnover.

The study further suggested that there are two important factors driving job satisfaction and organizational commitment: mutual respect and school safety (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). In essence, interactions and relationships among staff and students, along with autonomy over school staffing and the perception that school is a safe place, create a positive climate that increases overall satisfaction and decreases the likelihood of turnover. It was interesting to note that the study indicated that school composition was an important predictor of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. For instance, administrators serving in schools with higher proportions of minority students are less likely to be satisfied or committed (Liu & Bellibas, 2018), a finding corroborated by other researchers, including Tekleselassie and Choi (2021). Liu and Bellibas (2018) noted that this finding may be due to the struggles that such schools face with underachievement, teacher turnover, and disciplinary concerns. This is especially revealing since SISD and other districts like it have large minority populations (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a). It is in such school districts and campuses that support focused on mutual respect and school safety may be needed to help counteract challenges and mitigate attrition. Ultimately, understanding how school administrators perceive job satisfaction and organizational

commitment may give a clearer picture of the factors impacting their work and driving attrition. For this reason, and because research on the topic is limited, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are worthy of additional focus.

Self-Efficacy, Engagement, and Emotional Exhaustion

Over the years, the role of the school administrator has become increasingly complex (Vaisben, 2018). The constant evolution of the role can make it challenging to keep abreast of the broad range of skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill responsibilities effectively (Reid, 2021). This may lead school administrators to question their abilities. Self-efficacy is defined as the judgements that individuals make regarding their capacity and ability to organize, act upon, and master various expectations (Bandura, 1986; Skaalvik, 2020). In the case of school administrators, it also refers to how they perceive their ability to produce a desired outcome within the schools that they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Self-efficacy is a multidimensional construct that helps individuals gauge whether they can accomplish tasks and how well they can do so (Skaalvik, 2020). It is an important factor because it affects an individual's emotions, cognition, and behaviors (Skaalvik, 2020) and because it increases job satisfaction and engagement while decreasing burnout and turnover (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Furthermore, individuals who exhibit high self-efficacy set high goals and standards for themselves, whereas those with low self-efficacy often dwell on shortcomings and show avoidance behaviors in areas where they feel insecure about their abilities (Skaalvik, 2020). This aligns with Neumerski et al.'s (2018) findings which indicate that school administrators devote a small fraction of their time to instructional leadership because little guidance exists about how to carry out that function. In essence, such avoidance may be a result of low self-efficacy in instructional leadership. Similarly, because school administrators with high levels of self-

efficacy set high standards (Skaalvik, 2020), their campuses may have increased student achievement. This may have implications for the systems of support that school districts should consider implementing.

In general, self-efficacy is associated with a school administrator's well-being, leadership functioning, job satisfaction, persistence in attaining goals, quality of supervision over teachers, and motivation to remain in the profession (Skaalvik, 2020). However, self-efficacy in instructional leadership also has implications for engagement and emotional exhaustion. Work engagement is characterized by dedication and vigor for the role (Bakker et al., 2011), and it is positively related to job performance, effort, and organizational commitment (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Thus, school administrators who are engaged are more motivated to continue their work as school leaders. Emotional exhaustion refers to low energy and chronic fatigue, central dimensions of burnout and long-term stress (Skaalvik, 2020). A predicting factor of emotional exhaustion is low self-efficacy (Saricam & Sakiz, 2014). Therefore, higher self-efficacy results in higher levels of engagement and lower levels of emotional exhaustion. This, in turn, leads to higher motivation to stay in the profession. Similarly, lower self-efficacy results in lower levels of engagement and higher levels of emotional exhaustion, which lead to higher motivation to leave the profession. It is important to note that the author stressed that there was no direct relationship between self-efficacy and motivation to leave the profession (Skaalvik, 2020). Instead, the effect is indirect, whereby the high levels of exhaustion and low levels of engagement that come from low self-efficacy result in a higher likelihood of leaving the profession. What these findings highlight is that low levels of self-efficacy may be driving attrition. Therefore, SISD and other districts may need to

implement systems of support to increase self-efficacy in areas perceived as lacking by school administrators.

The impact of a school administrator on teacher development, student achievement, parental engagement, and school safety is undeniable, yet this group of leaders continues to experience significant instability and turnover (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). With anywhere from 25% - 50% of school administrators leaving their campuses or the profession every year (Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021; Truong, 2019), countless school campuses inevitably experience instability and repercussions of attrition. Student achievement and learning is disrupted. Teacher morale, job satisfaction, and commitment are affected as their instructional leaders depart. The cost to school districts is also significant, not only in terms of state level accountability, but also in regard to funding and resources necessary to find new human capital. However, current research indicates that there are certain factors that can help predict, mitigate, or even facilitate attrition. Liu and Bellibas (2018) asserted that job satisfaction and organizational commitment have an inverse effect on turnover and should not be overlooked by organizations seeking to alleviate high attrition rates. Skaalvik (2020) stressed that self-efficacy is a critical component and predictor of attrition because it fosters engagement and serves as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion. Combined, these factors result in a greater likelihood and motivation to remain in the profession.

Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

One factor that contributes to a high rate of attrition and mobility is the stark contrast that school administrators face as they grapple to reconcile the differences between the concept and reality of their roles (Truong, 2019). Such misalignment between reality and expectations may be directly attributed to inadequate educational leadership preparation. In order to understand how

and where the gaps between theory and practice may be occurring, it is important to first understand the nature of educational leadership preparation programs within the United States. The following section focuses on one of the most prevalent types of educational leadership preparation programs, namely those that are based out of universities and institutions of higher education. It also addresses current program components and challenges. Finally, an opposing view by proponents of university-based educational leadership programs is explored.

University-Based Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

As the most common type of program available and used, university-based educational leadership preparation programs have a responsibility to prepare future school administrators to serve as leaders (Campanotta et al., 2018). Yet, one challenge noted in the literature centers on the lack of consistency or uniformity between programs nationwide (Geer, 2020; Reising et al., 2019). Licensure rules and regulations vary widely throughout the United States (Reising et al., 2019), and while hundreds of educational leadership preparation programs exist, there are no standard recommendations guiding methodology, curriculum, or content (Vaisben, 2018). Geer (2020) asserted that university-based educational leadership preparation programs often lack standard admissions selectivity, sufficient rigor, and adequate resources, problems which the author concluded are contributing to the issues that plague schools. Further complicating the issue is that many programs are outdated or not current in their practices, resulting in the need for such programs to be assessed and possibly redesigned to meet the needs of today's leaders (Campanotta et al., 2018). Consequently, a vast majority of school administrators report that their program failed to prepare them for the challenges and rigor they encountered in practice.

Alternative Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

An increasingly used route to educational leadership preparation is found in alternative or non-traditional programs. These programs are often provided by independent educational entities or through one of the 20 Education Service Centers in Texas. The Education Service Centers were established to provide support and services to school districts throughout the state (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). The Texas Education Agency currently lists 68 approved certification programs for aspiring principals statewide (Texas Education Agency, 2022a). While the vast majority of them are university-based, there are 13 that are not. Of those 13 alternative programs, one is through an independent entity known as iteach Texas, while the remaining 12 are offered through the Education Service Centers within various regions. Every program has its own application process, requirements, and cost, but in general, following state guidelines, each requires a master's degree, a teaching certificate, and teaching experience (Texas Education Agency, 2022d). Some require leadership background, and all include internship or practicum requirements (Education Service Center Region 13, 2022; iteach Texas, 2022).

Every one of the 13 programs available are bound to the educator preparation program guidelines established by the Texas Education Agency (2022d). It should be noted that there is a lack of research-based evidence that supports the efficacy or passing rate of such programs, nor is such information found on the websites of most programs. Only the Education Service Center in Region 13 (2022) boasted a 100% passing rate for program candidates. Therefore, the ability of alternative educational leadership preparation programs to adequately prepare future school leaders for the rigor of their roles is difficult to gauge.

Program Components and Professional Standards

Recommendations vary widely regarding program components. Some programs advocate for internships (Markson, 2018) or mentoring (Hildreth et al., 2018), while others stress observation or theoretical learning to impact results or hone skills (Campanotta et al., 2018). Still others focus on the importance of performance-based assessments to provide reliable indicators of future success (Leonard, 2018). Thus, the way in which school administrators are prepared for their challenging roles can vary widely. To help mitigate the challenges caused by these differences, the literature advocates for continuous collaboration between school districts and universities to align the theoretical and practical aspects of educational leadership preparation programs (Boyle et al., 2016). Fostering partnerships with universities to develop innovative curriculum and robust internship experiences is a critical practice for advancing school administrator preparation (Boyle et al., 2016).

The complex nature of leadership within educational settings is also a challenge. As school administrators guide a campus, their roles as leaders and managers intersect (Vaisben, 2018). When they develop a vision and set the course and direction of a campus, school administrators serve as leaders. When they direct how goals will be reached and allocate resources, they serve as managers. Essentially, school administrators serve multiple leadership roles, including those of policy leader, professional leader, and administrative leader. For school administrators to feel confident, competent, and effective within their roles, they need robust preparation in all of these areas. Another challenge is that it is hard to find educational preparation programs that are consistently exemplary in three critical areas: licensure, placement in leadership positions, and job performance (Grissom et al., 2019). This shortage of

comprehensive and outstanding leadership programs makes it challenging to set an exemplar that can be replicated to further expand success.

While program components may vary, there are established standards aimed at ensuring alignment to professional guidelines and best practices. At the national level, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration developed, refined, and published the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. These standards are designed to prepare educational leaders for both the broad and day-to-day challenges inherent to their roles by outlining practices that promote equity and student achievement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). As such, they can be used by state educational boards to develop certification, licensure, and professional development programs.

In Texas, the State Board for Educator Certification has delineated specific skills and knowledge that leadership preparation programs must use in the development of coursework and curricula (Texas Education Agency, 2022d). This is done to ensure that future campus leaders are equipped for the challenges of their roles. These standards, outlined in the Texas Administrative Code, include requirements related to school culture, instructional leadership, human capital, executive leadership, operations, ethics, equity, and diversity (Texas Education Agency, 2014). They also align closely with those found in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. In order to ensure that future school administrators are able to pass state certification exams and serve effectively within their roles, educational leadership preparation programs must incorporate these standards (Texas Education Agency, 2019, 2022d).

Impact on Attrition

Leadership preparation that is gradual, focused on leadership, and which emphasizes instruction can lower the impact and occurrence of high administrator mobility (Truong, 2019).

Such preparation can help promote job satisfaction, increase organizational commitment, enhance self-efficacy, support engagement, and mitigate emotional exhaustion, thus reducing the likelihood of turnover (Liu & Bellibas, 2018; Reid, 2021; Skaalvik, 2020; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). Furthermore, without the explicit teaching of leadership and management skills, school administrators lack the policy, professional, and administrative capacity that is critical to school achievement and essential to student success (Vaisben, 2018). Therefore, high turnover has serious implications and can be attributed to a lack of systematic training and support for school administrators, which hinders their ability to meet the challenges of running a campus. By understanding the why behind attrition, school districts can better form targeted systems of support focused on enhancing knowledge, efficacy, or experience in high leverage areas to mitigate turnover.

Advocates for Current Programs

Not all researchers agree that university-based educational leadership preparation programs are insufficient. Ni et al. (2019) stated that such programs are able to provide quality, transferrable experiences that build capacity. However, the authors also noted that faculty quality is key and stressed that the most effective programs should include several key components. Among those components are a coherent, relevant, and rigorous curriculum, learning strategies that integrate theory and practice, and content that emphasizes instructional leadership. Others assert that while challenges exist for educational leadership preparation programs, there are exemplary ones that provide guidance for best practices in educational leadership preparation. Campanotta et al. (2018) found that several exemplary leadership programs share many of the same goals, attributes, and even components. Goals include developing leaders who impact authentic learning, instructional delivery methods that accommodate participant needs, and

coursework that is relevant, customized, and rigorous. Attributes shared include partnerships with school districts, collaborative cohorts, meaningful internships, coaching, easily accessible resources, and customized coursework. Lastly, exemplary educational leadership preparation programs share common components. These include selective admissions, paid internships, reflective practices, capstone projects, and a program length of 9 months to 3 years. In an effort to further enhance university-based leadership programs, some are turning to creative methods to deliver learning content. A study conducted on the efficacy of online educational leadership preparation programs revealed that graduates of those programs perceived that they were better prepared than their face-to-face counterparts, leading to the conclusion that online programs can be just as effective as traditional ones, when well-structured (Markson, 2018).

Inadequate educational leadership preparation may be contributing to the high rate of attrition and mobility among school administrators. Consequently, it is important to better understand the structure and nature of these programs. This section focused on university-based and alternative educational leadership preparation programs, carefully analyzing program components and their impact on attrition while addressing the perspective of program advocates. Although university-based educational leadership education programs are the most prevalent, there is little consistency or uniformity between programs nationwide (Geer, 2020; Reising et al., 2019). Some programs are not current (Campanotta et al., 2018) and need to be redesigned to better equip school administrators to meet the rigor and challenges of their responsibilities. Further complicating the ability of educational leadership preparation programs to meet the needs of campus leaders is the wide variety of program components. Some programs focus on internships or mentoring while others lean heavily on theory, observation, or performance assessments. This makes it challenging to set programmatic exemplars and undermines the

ability of school administrators to acquire the skills necessary for their roles. In spite of the challenges that university-based educational leadership preparation programs face, proponents still believe that such programs have merit. By incorporating best practices and program components, school administrators may benefit from the training acquired in traditional educational leadership preparation programs. Still, it is important to understand the nature of such programs in order to better gauge where gaps between theory and practice may be occurring, as relevant, focused preparation components may help mitigate attrition.

Support Systems

In addition to adequate educational leadership preparation, administrators need ongoing support provided by school districts to help them navigate the challenges of their demanding roles. Yet, few school districts provide learning opportunities to develop internal leaders (Hayes & Burkett, 2021). Research suggests that there are several best practices that can provide and maximize such support. What follows is an overview of some of those best practices. They include mentorships, principal pipeline initiatives, networking, communities of practice, interdisciplinary approaches, and leadership coaching.

Mentorships

Gimbel and Kefor (2018) asserted that new administrators benefit from having an experienced mentor to guide them. Mentoring partnerships contribute to self-efficacy by providing opportunities for mentees to acquire practical skills and to learn from day-to-day activities, data analysis, and decision-making (Hildreth et al., 2018). A mentor can also provide guidance, opportunities for networking, instruction, and modeling (Hayes & Burkett, 2021). Mentorship serves as a driver of career advancement, especially among Latino and minority principals (Fernandez et al., 2015). It is associated with successful innovations as well (Gordon

et al., 2016). When implemented with fidelity, such innovations lead to positive contributions and outcomes (Gordon et al., 2016). Yet, in spite of the benefits provided through the mentorship exchange, school administrators seldom have consistent access to a mentor, and only 20 states currently support mentoring programs through legislation (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Even state supported programs often lack funding, making them challenging to implement. For instance, Title II Grant funds, which support professional development, only allocate two percent of funds toward the development of school administrators (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018).

Principal Pipeline Initiatives

Despite potential barriers, Hayes and Burkett (2021) stressed that school districts should take responsibility for preparing and developing school administrators to take on the multitude of challenges inherent to their roles. They also referred to this responsibility as a principal pipeline initiative (PPI), a term that describes all of the talent management activities that a school district should implement to grow their leaders. These authors found that when a PPI is implemented with fidelity, it has a great impact on all school administrators, but especially on those who are new. Gates et al. (2019) conducted an examination of strategies implemented by six urban school districts that further supports the importance of strategic and systematic processes that develop school administrators. That study found that when leader standards, preservice preparation opportunities, selective hiring and placement, and on-the-job induction, evaluation, and support are provided to school administrators, there are several key results: student achievement increases, performance measurably improves, and school administrators' retention rates increase. Furthermore, as these strategies are implemented with focus and fidelity, school administrators can improve their leadership skills, thus growing in confidence. As confidence grows, so does self-efficacy, and self-efficacy helps mitigate attrition (Skaalvik, 2020).

Networking and Communities of Practice

Another perspective in the research suggests that administrators benefit from creating networks of support through their peers and professional communities of practice (Bowers, 2017). When adults are part of collaborative social environments, they can acquire, share, and apply knowledge (Swann et al., 2021). These communities of practice also enhance role identity formation and facilitate continuous development of individuals and improvement of organizations (Swann et al., 2021). Educational leaders overwhelmingly report a need for continuous and consistent collaboration, discussion, and reflection as a means of professional growth and support (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Furthermore, approximately 28% of school administrators report that affiliation and engagement with a professional network helps buffer challenges and enhances their willingness to stay in the profession despite the challenges (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Thus, support systems via networking and communities of practice benefit school administrators and are essential to their success. Such communities foster opportunities for professional development, formal learning, problem-solving, brainstorming, networking, and the sharing of ideas and knowledge (Swann et al., 2021).

Interdisciplinary Approaches

There are also those who advocate for interdisciplinary approaches which incorporate best practices from the field of education and the business profession. One way to do this is to expose school administrators to management and leadership practices from professionals outside of the K-12 world (Smith & Somers, 2016). Zhang et al. (2017) added that global literacy and competency are critical components to leadership and student success. Fellowships may be a means for gaining such knowledge. Interdisciplinary approaches support the need for creative solutions to equip school leaders with the leadership, business management, and global literacy

skills that they need. If school districts fail to incorporate such practices, they may find it challenging to retain talented administrators.

Leadership Coaching

While the task of equipping school administrators can be complex and daunting, notable and innovative systems of support do exist. One such practice is the implementation of leadership coaching. In one program based in the western United States, public school principals received leadership coaching support from retired school and district administrators who were trained in Blended Coaching, a model designed specifically for school leaders (Lochmiller, 2018). The findings from that study indicated that coaching led to advances in school reform initiatives and provided administrators with tools and protocols that augmented their leadership practices (Lochmiller, 2018). Having a leadership coach also helped school administrators navigate resistance when they sought to change classroom or instructional practices (Lochmiller, 2018). This translates into academic success for students.

Educational leadership preparation programs do not provide enough training to meet the needs of school administrators. Therefore, to better navigate the challenges of their roles, administrators need school districts to be intentional about providing targeted and relevant support. Gimbel and Kefor (2018) and Hildreth et al. (2018) found there are several best practices that can maximize and foster the potential of school leaders. This section addressed those best practices for targeted and systemic support. For instance, by allowing school administrators to acquire proficiency in data analysis, instructional leadership, and decision-making, mentorships can drive career advancement. School districts can also implement principal pipeline initiatives to grow leaders and develop skills (Gates et al., 2019; Hayes & Burkett, 2021). Networking provides opportunities for school administrators to learn from and

collaborate with their peers (Bowers, 2017; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). It also facilitates knowledge and resource sharing (Swann et al., 2021). Some researchers even advocate for systems of support that integrate approaches from other disciplines, such as the business profession (Smith & Somers, 2016). An additional recommendation is to equip leaders by providing a leadership coach to help augment their practices (Lochmiller, 2018). The key takeaway is that regardless of approach, school districts must be intentional about supplementing traditional educational leadership preparation programs with internal, targeted, and robust systems of support, not only to better equip leaders for success, but also to mitigate attrition.

Summary

The topics explored in this literature review reflect the complex and multilayered nature of school administrator attrition. Self-determination theory (SDT) served as the framework guiding this study as understanding was sought regarding how school administrators are motivated to persevere in their roles, how they make sense of their responsibilities, and how they relate to their organizations. SDT is a theory of motivation built on the premise that humans have a basic psychological need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness and that meeting these needs leads to wellness, enhanced performance, and motivation (Deci et al., 2017). By examining whether or not these needs are being met within the district of study, SDT may help guide understanding pertaining to the why and how behind attrition.

The literature review also addressed the role of the school administrator, along with the state of current educational leadership preparation programs and district-implemented systems of support. Today's school administrators face ever-evolving landscapes and challenges as they strive to fulfill the duties and responsibilities that come with their roles (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Reid, 2021; Vaisben, 2018). They must become proficient and capable instructional leaders who

guide teachers (Hallinger et al., 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018), drive student success (Boyle et al., 2016; Corcoran, 2017), foster parental engagement (Reinke et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021), and maintain the safety of everyone under their care (Brown et al., 2022). They must also acquire skills in areas such as mental health awareness (Reid, 2021), branding, and communication (Jasis, 2021; Reid, 2021). Such skills are not typically taught or addressed in traditional educational leadership preparation programs. While some school districts are responding to the evolving needs of school administrators by implementing systems of support, the literature suggests that gaps exist, and these gaps are impacting job satisfaction, organizational commitment, engagement, emotional exhaustion, and consequently, driving attrition rates to unprecedented levels.

Despite the research that exists, what is yet to be discovered is whether support systems are impacting the departure of school administrators within the district of study in a positive or negative way. Without specific data, it is difficult to inform and advise Study Independent School District, and similar school districts, regarding best practices for support and retention. What is evident is that effective school administrators drive school improvement, achievement, and performance (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). However, because these campus leadership roles are complex, an administrator is challenged to fulfill all required responsibilities without additional preparation and support (Vaisben, 2018). The resulting disparity between the expectations and the reality of the role can influence attrition (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018), and when that happens, schools, teachers, and students are negatively impacted (Liu & Bellibas, 2018; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021). Therefore, districts must be diligent and purposeful in creating and implementing systems of support to train and guide school administrators.

Chapter 3 will focus on the methodology used to examine what current and former school administrators consider to be factors that enhance or hinder their ability to carry out the multiple functions they carry out while leading campuses. It will also address how school administrators describe factors that influence attrition and what they perceive school districts should do to best assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, information regarding the descriptive qualitative methodology and design that will be implemented, along with the rationale for its use, will be examined in Chapter 3. Lastly, the overarching research questions for which the study seeks answers will be presented.

Chapter 3: Research Method

School administrators have daunting and challenging roles. As campus leaders, they are tasked with supporting the development of teachers, the success of students, the involvement of parents, and the safety of every individual in the school building (Brown et al., 2022; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019). Yet, in spite of the varied and broad nature of their roles, school administrators report that educational leadership preparation and in-district systems of support are often lacking, resulting in high attrition and instability (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Truong, 2019). Further driving retention challenges may be the inability of work organizations to meet the basic psychological needs of their employees, which in turn hinders the development of autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators at Study Independent School District in order to better understand how their experiences were reflected in turnover rates, why attrition was happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support were accelerating their departure. It sought to answer four primary research questions regarding current and former K-12 school administrators within the district of study: What do they consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? What do they consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? How do they describe the factors that contribute to attrition? What systems of support do they perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities? This chapter addresses the study's research design, methods, population, data collection, materials, instruments, and analysis procedures. It also focuses on ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative descriptive design was used. The lived experience of individuals is complex and broad (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). It goes beyond a singular description as it weaves in variables like context, awareness, and perspective. When the goal within research is to capture the rich, detailed data of complex lived experiences, a qualitative approach is best (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Such approaches help capture the meaning of lived experiences and give voice to authentic, personal perspectives and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). By examining phenomena in a natural state, qualitative descriptive approaches give way to research that focuses on the who, what, and where of experiences, thus providing insight directly from participants (Kim et al., 2017). Herein lies the strength of qualitative descriptive designs. By providing straightforward, yet comprehensive, descriptions of phenomena and experiences, a qualitative descriptive design facilitates understanding of the areas being explored (O'Brien et al., 2017). Once analyzed, it is that understanding and insight that can lead to the development of interventions (Kim et al., 2017).

A qualitative descriptive design presents features and techniques beneficial to this study. First, the approach is well-suited to studies that seek to develop straight-forward descriptions of the facts within a phenomenon (Turale, 2020). Second, it allows for flexibility in theory and framework within a study (Sandelowski, 2010). However, Sandelowski (2010) stressed that a lack of commitment to a specific theory should not be interpreted as a lack of theoretical influence. In essence, qualitative descriptive studies may begin with a theory or framework of the target phenomenon, but that theory or framework may change as the investigation develops, and researchers must be willing to adjust if warranted. This element of a qualitative descriptive design proved useful since an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. An additional feature

of qualitative descriptive design that was beneficial to this study centered on data collection. Qualitative description aligns well with studies that involve questionnaire and survey instruments (Turale, 2020). It also allows for data collection strategies designed around semistructured interviews and focus groups (Sandelowski, 2000). These were the preferred methods of data collection for this research study. Finally, qualitative descriptive approaches are useful in developing interventions (Turale, 2020). Since one goal of this study was to inform and provide recommendations regarding a foundation for systems of support, the descriptive approach was appropriate.

This is not to say that other research designs were not considered. For instance, this study could have been conducted through a phenomenological design. Phenomenological approaches help capture the meaning of lived experiences and give voice to authentic, personal perspectives and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). By portraying socially constructed realities and breaking those down into data that focuses on meaning and interpretation (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), phenomenological approaches give way to research that informs, guides, supports, and even challenges policies and action (Traini et al., 2021). This is accomplished through the gathering of information via interviews, discussions, and observation (Traini et al., 2021). However, researchers employing a phenomenological approach are tasked with interpreting meaning from observed phenomena and focusing on understanding meaning within experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Such robust interpretation and deep understanding were not the primary goals of this study. Rather, describing what was occurring, as perceived by school administrators, and providing recommendations for potential interventions were the true focus of this research. To that end, a qualitative descriptive design was both useful and important (Turale, 2020). With its

straightforward description of experiences, focus on staying close to the data, and emphasis on the development of interventions, this approach was consistent with the goals of this study. Furthermore, since the purpose of this study was to understand and interpret experiences in order to develop new insight and make recommendations, this approach also aligned with its underlying purpose. As such, qualitative descriptive design was better aligned with the intent and purpose of this study and guided the research process.

Research Method

Qualitative approaches provide a means to capture and examine the experiences of school administrators within the district of study. A qualitative descriptive design in particular aims to emphasize meaning and insight within lived experiences in order to develop new understandings and interventions (Kim et al., 2017). There are several advantages to conducting a qualitative study. Qualitative research focuses on the analysis of words and images and specifically examines what people say, do, and experience (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). It also gives voice to concerns, emphasizes human expression, and provides a means by which to analyze human conditions. The purpose of this research was to examine the lived experiences of school administrators and to determine whether those experiences were impacting the current turnover rate. A primary focus was to provide possible solutions and recommendations to mitigate attrition based on those experiences. The goal was not just to offer another best practice, but rather, to use understanding and interpretation of the data to move beyond the status quo, to propose what Kahane (2010) referred to as next, rather than best, practice. Therefore, by using a qualitative approach to gather rich descriptions via semistructured interviews and focus groups, the experiences, feelings, and perceptions of school administrators were captured in order to seek ways to support their work and increase retention rates.

Quantitative research aims to prove, disprove, or provide support for existing theories (Leavy, 2017). This is typically accomplished by determining and measuring variables and by testing relationships between them in order to find patterns, relationships, and correlations. Because the primary purpose of quantitative research methods is to explain or evaluate events, it was not well aligned with the intent and purpose of this study. A mixed methods approach integrates elements of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. In such approaches, the goal is to explain, describe, or evaluate phenomena to reach a more comprehensive understanding of what is occurring (Leavy, 2017). It is also used to prompt social action or change. While the approach may have possibly aligned with this study, a completely qualitative approach better met the purpose and intent of this study in one way: it allowed for the robust exploration of voice and human experience, as expressed through verbiage and vocabulary provided solely by those affected rather than by the researcher, as may occur with quantitative collection instruments, such as surveys. For these reasons, after considering other research methods, a qualitative descriptive design was the methodology best suited for the exploration of the problem of practice.

Population

Although exact data are challenging to find, the most current statistics indicate that there are approximately 90,900 principals and 80,600 assistant principals working in K-12 public school campuses in the United States (Mathematica, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Approximately 8,728 principals serve K-12 campuses in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2022c), and even though data are not readily available regarding the number of assistant principals, it can be surmised that their number is close to 8,000, assuming that Texas mirrors the statistics seen in the rest of the United States. That would mean there are currently

nearly 17,000 school administrators leading campuses within the state. This is the population on which the study sought to focus for two reasons. The first was that this population is substantial in size. The second was that many of these school administrators work in districts that often do not have the financial resources or human capital necessary to create structured educational leadership pipelines. Many also lack the networking or access opportunities to collaborate with university-based educational leadership preparation programs in order to better tailor programs to meet a district's specific needs. Therefore, if the purpose of this research study was fulfilled, the recommendations provided would have the potential to influence support for hundreds of administrators in Texas employed in school districts with varying resources.

The target population for this study was 44 school administrators in grades K-12 who either currently work within or have resigned from Study Independent School District. Vaisben (2018) defined a school administrator as a campus leader holding the title of assistant principal, vice-principal, or principal. Therefore, to explore the perceptions of varying title holders, both principals and assistant principals were asked to participate in the study. The insight that school administrators at both levels provided the opportunity to better gauge the gaps between preparation and practice based on different levels of experience. Twelve administrators were selected at random from among the target population that met the predetermined criteria. The target was participation from six principals and six assistant principals. Specifically, three principals and three assistant principals were to be chosen from among those who have left the school district, and three principals and three assistant principals were to be selected from among those who remained at Study Independent School District. Although this may have seemed like a small sample size, research by Young and Casey (2019) indicated that the majority of themes within qualitative studies emerge within the first six interviews, allowing for data saturation.

Therefore, 12 interviews allowed for optimal data collection and provided data saturation. Information gathered from these interviews was supported by data acquired by conducting a focus group with administrators.

Study Sample

After attaining site authorization (see Appendix H), the study sample was recruited from among the pool of assistant principals and principals who currently work at Study Independent School District and from among those who have resigned from it. However, since the district only has 18 campuses and approximately 44 school administrators, there was the possibility that participants who currently work for the district would not be willing to participate. Similarly, there are approximately 15 school administrators who have resigned from the district. It was understood that that might make it challenging to recruit participants to interview or participate in a focus group. Had that occurred, participants would have been sought from neighboring school districts with similar demographics and student populations, of which there are at least four.

While a lack of participants was a primary concern, it was also possible that too many participants would want to participate in the study. Had that occurred, the following considerations would have been taken into account in selecting final participants to be interviewed or to participate in the focus group: the number of years that the administrator had worked for the district of study, whether or not they had experience in school districts similar in size and demographic to the district of study, the number of years of experience that the administrator had in his or her respective position. These considerations would have helped ensure that participants represented a broad range of years within the district of study, of

experience in representative school districts, and of experience within the profession, thus increasing the potential for transferability and applicability of results to similar populations.

To recruit participants, the following steps were taken:

- Current administrators in the study district were contacted via email, targeting three current assistant principals and three current principals (see Appendix G)
- A time to speak regarding the study was requested
- For those willing to discuss the study, a phone call based on participant availability was set up
- Potential participants were called and the purpose of the study was discussed
- Interest in participating was gauged
- The focus group and interviews were set up
- The process was repeated with former school administrators, targeting three former assistant principals and three former principals.

Materials/Instruments

The semistructured interviews consisted of 16 questions directly related to school administrator's perceptions of factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus, factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus, factors that contribute to attrition, and systems of support that they perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities. It was expected that the interviews would range from 45–60 minutes in length. The semistructured interview format guidelines prescribed by McNamara (n.d.) were followed (see Appendices A through C). Before each interview, the purpose of the study was reviewed. Additionally, confidentiality was addressed and the interview format and expected time commitment were discussed. Prior to beginning the interview,

participants were asked if they had any questions. If the participants agreed to participate in the study and to proceed with the interview, they were asked to sign the informed consent form (see Appendix E). They were also advised they could withdraw from the study at any time. As a final step, my contact information, including a phone number and email address, were provided to participants, should they have any questions about the study or the research process at a later time.

Rather than using an interview instrument already created by other researchers who have explored similar topics, specific questions pertaining to this research study's questions were developed. Thus, I served as the instrument through which data were obtained (Chenail, 2011). Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of school administrators, questions for the interview and focus group were structured with open-ended questions.

The interview and focus group questions were reviewed and vetted by an expert panel before any participant interviews were conducted. The panel consisted of individuals with experience in the field of education, including those with experience as school administrators. Employing the assistance of an expert panel served multiple purposes. First, it ensured that questions were relevant and aligned to the purpose of the study and research questions that the study sought to answer (Chenail, 2011). Second, enlisting an expert panel assisted by catching errors, providing insight about methods or protocols to increase effectiveness, and recommending revisions, additions, and edits necessary prior to conducting interviews with live participants. It is also important to note that the expert panel provided a safeguard to ensure rigor and manage bias. Finally, they helped mitigate any concerns that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) might have had regarding the integrity of an instrument that had not been tested before. Thus, the addition of an expert panel to review the interview and focus group questions and

generate feedback (see Appendix D) helped ensure an ethical and responsible approach to conducting the participant interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection consisted of face-to-face semistructured interviews with study participants, in addition to one focus group. Prior to conducting interviews or the focus group, a survey was sent to school administrators within the target population to gauge interest in participating in an interview, focus group, or both. Using that data, lists of potential participants were created, the inclusion or exclusion criteria described previously was used to narrow down final participants, and participants were invited to take part in either an interview or the focus group. It was determined that in the event that face-to-face interviews were not feasible, interviews would be conducted via Zoom. The interviews would be captured by the Zoom software and audio recorded with a portable recorder as a backup. Because the purpose of this study was to capture the experiences of, and challenges faced by, school administrators as closely as possible, semistructured interview questions were used. Semistructured questions allow participants to express experiences and perceptions (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). Therefore, including such questions in the interview allowed for the gathering of rich descriptions and helped answer the research questions. Data collection instruments included a predetermined interview protocol with semistructured questions to be asked of each participant (see Appendix A). Questions for the two categories of participants (current and former school administrators) were closely aligned but modified as appropriate to address the two different types of participants, namely school administrators who had left the profession or school district and those who had remained. To set up interviews, the following steps were followed:

- Had the interview been held in person, a location to hold the interview would have been secured, directions would have been provided to the participant, audio equipment would have been set up, and interviews would have been recorded.
- If the interview was held via Zoom, a Zoom session was created, the zoom link was provided to participants, participants were renamed to maintain privacy and confidentiality (i.e., AP1C, P2F), and the interview was recorded on Zoom with an audio device recorded backup.
- Copies of informed consent forms were provided electronically for signatures and the electronic copies were signed using DropBox/HelloSign.
- A script was generated to ensure that all participants heard the same thing regarding the purpose of the study.
- Contact information was provided to participants so that they could contact me should questions arise.
- Copies of the interview questions were made.
- A space within Google was created to store audio and video recordings.

While the goal was to conduct all interviews face-to-face, virtual interviews using Zoom were conducted, as conditions did not allow for a face-to-face modality.

Data Analysis

Since data collection focused on perceptions and descriptions received from participants in both interviews and a focus group, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. This analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases include becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report. It should be noted that the phases

are similar to those of other qualitative research, and that Braun and Clarke (2006) stressed that the process of conducting a thematic analysis is recursive, not linear. Thus, there may be movement between phases throughout the process. What follows is a brief overview of each phase of a thematic analysis, as described in the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

- Phase 1 – Familiarization with the data: This phase involves becoming immersed in the data to the point of being deeply and widely familiar with the content. It may require reading transcripts repeatedly, searching for meaning, looking for patterns, and writing down initial ideas. It also entails careful transcription, or verbatim written account, of the verbal data gathered during interviews and focus groups. While familiarization with the data may seem like a cumbersome phase, the authors emphasized how vital this step is in providing a solid foundation for the rest of the analysis.
- Phase 2 – Generating initial codes: Once a researcher has become deeply familiar with the data and has generated an initial list of ideas of what the data contains, initial codes can be produced. Codes signal interesting content or information that can help a researcher organize the data into meaningful groups. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) stated that coding condenses data into rich and compact forms of meaning and allows the research to reflect each interviewee’s language in the analysis. It is important to note that coding differs from themes. Whereas codes help organize the data into meaningful extracts, themes are broader and emerge from coded data. Because this study was guided by a conceptual framework, it was important to approach the data with the framework and research questions in mind as coding took place. Coding was done manually.

- Phase 3 – Searching for themes: This phase begins once the data has been initially coded, and codes have been identified throughout the data set. The focus of the analysis in this phase becomes looking at broader or overarching themes as codes are sorted. Visuals such as tables, mind-maps, or thematic maps are often helpful in this stage, allowing for careful examination of relationships between codes, themes, and levels of themes. Ideally, this phase ends when all coded extracts of data have been placed within the developed collection of possible themes and subthemes. Since this study collected and coded data from interviews and a focus group, the interviews were going to be analyzed first, and themes would be generated. Data from the focus group was going to be analyzed next, and themes would then be generated. The themes from the interviews and focus group were going to then be combined to create the different levels of themes. As described in Chapter 4, both data sets were ultimately analyzed together.
- Phase 4 – Reviewing of themes: During this phase, themes are refined as they are combined, collapsed, or broken down based on careful analysis of the themes initially established in Phase 3. The goal is to establish themes within which data comes together in a meaningful way and between which there are clear and easily identifiable distinctions. The authors proposed two levels of review and refinement to get to that point. The first involves carefully reviewing the coded extracts for each theme to ensure that they form a coherent pattern. A thematic map is useful during this level of analysis. Level two involves carefully reviewing the themes in relation to the data set as a whole, a process which may necessitate rereading the entire data set until a robust and comprehensive thematic map is devised. The authors caution that the process of coding

and generation of themes can become endless, so it is important to remember that if refinements and adjustments are not yielding substantial changes, it may be time to stop.

- Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes: Within this phase, the essence, or basic gist, of each theme is identified, and the aspects of the data that each theme captures is determined. Then, for every theme, an analysis is conducted and written, with careful attention paid to what each theme reveals and how it fits into the purpose of the study. Finally, working titles should be assigned to each theme. These titles should be concise but must also capture a reader’s attention and give them a sense of what the theme entails. Ultimately, the goal of this phase is to clearly identify what the themes are and what they are not.
- Phase 6 – Producing the report: Once all themes have been defined and identified, the final analysis and report will be generated. This phase is geared toward capturing the complex story that the data reveals in a logical, concise, coherent, and interesting way. The authors strongly suggest that, to make the report more impactful and compelling, data extracts from the analysis should be used. This helps to strengthen the argument made by the research in relation to the study’s purpose and research questions while strengthening its merit.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles must be followed in research and are especially critical when human participants are involved. To that end, the IRB is vital. As a regulatory committee, an IRB is tasked with overseeing and maintaining ethical standards when human subjects are part of a research study, and any criteria set forth by an IRB must be met prior to the start of any such study (Blackwood et al., 2015). Criteria include ensuring that risk to subjects is minimized, any

potential risks are reasonable in relation to possible benefits, selection of subjects is equitable, and that informed consent is sought and documented. These criteria, which are tightly woven into the IRB approval process, align closely with the Belmont Report. The Belmont Report provides a framework and principles for conducting research with human participants in an ethical and moral way (Redman & Caplan, 2021). The report indicates that three basic principles must be followed: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (The Belmont Report, 1979). The IRB helps ensure that these principles are followed. Therefore, because this study involved participation of human subjects via interviews and a focus group, and as a way to ensure ethical practices were maintained, IRB approval was sought and obtained prior to conducting any research (see Appendix F).

In order to ensure that the problem of practice was studied in a way that minimized risk to participants, several ethical guidelines were followed. The first guideline was informed consent, and it was addressed by providing all participants with detailed information regarding the exact nature of the study, what participants would do, what the study sought to discover, and what would be done with the data gathered (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Participants were further advised regarding how confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld. This was especially important since the participants were from the same district, knew each other, and worked within a tight-knit community. All of this was provided in writing so that the parameters of the study were clearly communicated. The benefit to participants was the enhanced training and support that arose as a result of the research findings.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is distinctly different from quantitative research. Therefore, the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity do not apply in a similar fashion to qualitative

studies (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Because of this, the rigor or trustworthiness of qualitative studies is analyzed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is established when readers believe that the study is well constructed and that the reported findings are sound. Thus, in order to achieve credibility, the study was supported through a carefully crafted literature review and sound conceptual framework.

Furthermore, the use of an interview protocol and carefully structured questions approved by a focus group helped to ensure that data collection methods aligned with the research questions and led me to craft a clear, well-written report about the research journey and findings. Transferability refers to how well the findings can be transferred to another context (Shenton, 2004). This is especially challenging since qualitative studies often consist of small sample sizes. In order to enhance transferability, sufficient information about the nature of the district of study, the role of the participants, the research design and method, along with the scope and impact of the problem was provided so readers would be able to transfer the findings to their own contexts. Because the literature supported that a need for leadership preparation exists and turnover among administrators is a concern, transferability was a feasible prospect within this study.

Dependability addresses the concept of reliability, or how well the work and methods can be repeated (Shenton, 2004). This element of trustworthiness can be achieved by reporting every process of the study in such detail that future researchers can replicate it. Therefore, as this study was conducted, the steps and reasoning behind the research design and data collection, as well as a reflective evaluation of the effectiveness of the process, were explicitly described.

Confirmability, which is an additional concept of trustworthiness, refers to objectivity, or the ability of the researcher to mitigate their bias (Shenton, 2004). One way this was achieved was through the use of a focus group. Chenail (2011) asserted that the use of a focus group not only

helps ensure rigor but also serves to mitigate any biases the researcher may be unaware of. Confirmability was further enhanced by acknowledging whether such biases existed when the research report was written. It was also supported by carefully detailing what methods were followed, how data were collected, and how the data led to the findings so that readers were able to follow the process and determine for themselves whether bias influenced any results. Thus, trustworthiness was addressed in these ways as the study was conducted.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions underlying this study. The first was that the school administrators selected for interviews represented the experience of other school administrators in school districts of similar size and demographics. A second assumption was that participants were forthcoming and provided honest responses, since that provided the basis for findings and recommendations. Finally, it was assumed that by agreeing to be part of this study, participants, especially those who may have left the profession on less than agreeable terms, had good intentions and were not clouded by personal agendas.

To address these assumptions, thoughtful consideration was given to how participants were selected, and their perceptions were carefully detailed to establish credibility and allow readers to relate to the experiences described (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Furthermore, efforts were made to triangulate data via the use of a focus group in order to enhance reliability (Chenail, 2011; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Finally, since I had little control over any biases or false responses provided by participants, readers were informed that the possibility of their influence existed.

Limitations

There were several limitations that may have affected the reliability and trustworthiness of the results. Prior to taking on my current role, I served in a central office leadership capacity for many years within the district of study. During that time, I established personal and professional relationships with school administrators at every grade level, and at some point, I had direct contact with the vast majority of the administrators in the district, including many of those who have left or resigned. Although relationships were established or contact made with these individuals, at no point did I have a supervisory relationship with any of them during my tenure at Study Independent School District. However, the preestablished relationships may have impacted my ability to fully capture, or of the participants to fully share, perceptions of their experiences, attrition, and levels of support. Thus, the potential for personal bias existed. Providing participants thorough information regarding the study and its purpose may have helped mitigate the effects of this limitation. It is also important to note that the past 2 years have been an exceptionally trying time for educators and educational leaders because of the evolving nature of the pandemic and constantly changing public health landscape. This may have impacted how school administrators perceived their roles and the level of support provided by their school district. Feedback by the expert panel was valuable in the creation of questions. By carefully crafting interview questions and enlisting the support of the focus group, I was able to ensure that the interview remained focused on the purpose of the study and on answering the research questions posed. In this way, the effects of this limitation were diminished.

Delimitations

The study had several delimitations. First, it was focused solely on the perceptions of school administrators. This means that perspectives of district level leaders were not considered.

This is important to note because there may have been systems of support that district level leaders have implemented or plan to implement that school administrators may not have been aware of. This gap in awareness may have impacted how school administrators perceived levels of support provided by their leadership. Second, this study was designed to understand the perspectives of campus leaders who are part of one specific school district with a distinct culture and demographic. In other words, this study was limited to current and former K-12 school administrators who worked or had worked within the district of study. Therefore, their experiences should not be taken as a representation of every school administrator working within every educational setting in Texas or the United States.

Summary

Chapter 3 addressed how this qualitative study would be conducted. The purpose of the study was to examine the perspectives of school administrators at Study Independent School District in order to better understand how their experiences were reflected in turnover rates, why attrition was happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support were accelerating departures. To achieve this purpose and answer the established research questions, a qualitative descriptive design was used. A qualitative descriptive approach was most appropriate within the scope of this study because it helps generate straight-forward descriptions of the facts within a phenomenon (Turale, 2020) and allows for flexibility in theory and framework (Sandelowski, 2010). Participants included K-12 school administrators who were currently, or had formerly, worked at Study Independent School District. Their experiences and perceptions were captured via semistructured interviews consisting of 16 questions supplemented by a focus group and generated with the assistance, guidance, and input of an expert panel. For both the interviews and focus groups, data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis

that followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. This chapter also addressed ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, and Chapter 4 will focus on the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

School administrators are faced with challenging tasks and responsibilities. They guide teachers, support student success, ensure the safety of everyone on their campus, and foster relationships with parents and the community (Brown et al., 2022; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019). Yet, many of these educational leaders assert that their leadership preparation programs have gaps between theory and practice and that school district support is insufficient to meet their needs, and this, in turn, decreases retention and impacts the stability of a campus (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Truong, 2019). Additionally, the inability of work organizations to meet the basic psychological needs of school administrators hinders their autonomous motivation and further drives attrition (Deci et al., 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators at Study Independent School District in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in turnover rates, why attrition is happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. Answers to four primary research questions regarding current and former K-12 school administrators within the district of study were sought. The following research questions guided this study: What do school administrators consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? What do they consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? How do they describe the factors that contribute to attrition? What systems of support do they perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities? This chapter addresses the study's research data collection, analysis procedures, final themes, and results. It also focuses on data and themes to answer the study research questions.

Changes and Updates

Data collection, as described in Chapter 3, went as scheduled, with the exception of two modifications. The first modification is that all 12 semistructured interviews, as well as the focus group, were conducted via Zoom and not face-to-face. While every attempt to schedule data collection in a face-to-face format was made, each study participant requested to participate virtually. Participants expressed that this method was more convenient and conducive to their busy schedules. This was especially true for the focus group. All steps described in Chapter 3 for virtual interviews were followed, including using Zoom software's video recording capability and a portable recorder to capture backup audio, as well as using HelloSign/Dropbox to secure signatures for all informed consent forms. All video and audio recordings are securely stored as described in Chapter 3. The second modification occurred in the initial phase of analysis. While becoming familiar with the data via listening to recordings, transcribing, and then reading and rereading interview and focus group transcripts, it became clear that the responses from both sources of data were very much alike. It also became evident that due to their similarities, combining both data sources would lead to a larger data set to code from and that nothing from the focus group would be overpowered, lost, or buried by the interviews. Thus, after discussing this in detail with the study's dissertation chair, the decision was made to conduct one combined analysis of both data sources as opposed to two. Extra care was taken in the development of themes to look for evidence and sample responses from both the interviews and focus group.

Preparation of Raw Data for Analysis and Descriptive Data

To begin the transcription process, all recordings were carefully stored and organized in alphabetical order, based on participants' pseudonyms, in a Google drive folder created specifically for this study. Then, each video file was uploaded into Otter.ai, a speech to text

transcription application. The Otter.ai software generated raw transcriptions for each interview and the focus group. While the software was helpful, the transcriptions contained multiple obvious transcription errors and misreads, making them less than accurate. Therefore, each video interview was played and listened to multiple times, and the recordings were carefully compared against the raw transcripts. Corrections to transcription errors were made until each interview and focus group transcript captured the data precisely. As a final step, each recording was played back and compared against the transcript to ensure accuracy. Thus, there was a high level of confidence that the transcripts are a true reflection of the interview and focus group data.

Descriptive Data

The participants for this study were all either current or former school administrators from the study district. A concerted effort was made to have participants from all three school levels, namely elementary, middle, and high school, and to ensure that there was representation from both principals and assistant principals. Table 1 provides demographic data for participants who were current school administrators in the study district.

Table 1

Descriptive Data for Current School Administrators

Participant	Role	Level	Gender	Years of experience in administration
P1C	Principal	Elementary	Female	4
P2C	Principal	High School	Female	1
P3C	Principal	Elementary	Female	3
AP1C	Assistant Principal	Middle School	Male	4
AP2C	Assistant Principal	High School	Female	13
AP3C	Assistant Principal	High School	Female	4

Table 2 provides demographic data for participants who were former school administrators in the study district.

Table 2

Descriptive Data for Former School Administrators

Participant	Role	Level	Gender	Years of experience in administration
P1F	Principal	Elementary	Female	1
P2F	Principal	High School	Male	14
AP1F	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Male	7
AP2F	Assistant Principal	High School	Male	6
AP3F	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Female	3
AP4F	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Male	4

Table 3 provides demographic data for the focus group participants. The focus group included both current and former school administrators within the study district.

Table 3

Descriptive Data for Focus Group Participants

Participant	Role	Level	Gender	Years of experience in administration
SA1C	Assistant Principal	Elementary	Male	1
SA2C	Assistant Principal	Middle School	Male	9
SA3C	Assistant Principal	High School	Male	3
SA1F	Principal	Elementary	Female	2

Interview Data

For the individual interviews, participants were contacted to arrange a time and place to conduct the interview. The contact occurred primarily via email correspondence. Overwhelmingly, participants requested that virtual interviews be conducted via Zoom since this method was better geared toward their busy schedules. Once a date and time for the interviews were finalized, a Zoom session was set up and the information for the session, including the date, time, and Zoom meeting link, was sent to each participant via email. Calendar invitations containing the Zoom meeting link were also sent using Microsoft Outlook. To prepare for each interview, hard copies of the interview questions were produced, and steps were taken to ensure that the portable audio recorder was charged and in good working order.

On the day of the interviews, the Zoom session was launched at least 20 minutes prior to the start time to ensure that the recording feature was ready. Once participants entered the Zoom session, they were welcomed, and pleasantries were exchanged. Then, the participants' names were changed on the Zoom screen to reflect the pseudonym assigned, and the participants' camera was turned off. This was done to further protect the participants' anonymity. At that point, the Zoom recording began, and the prescribed script was followed. This was done for each of the 12 individual interviews that were conducted. The tables that follow describe the date and duration of each interview, along with the number of pages of 12-point, singled-spaced, Times New Roman font data which the transcription yielded. Table 4 provides interview data for current school administrators within the study district.

Table 4*Data for Interview Sessions With Current School Administrators*

Participant	Date	Duration	Length of transcript
P1C	2/1/2023	56 minutes, 23 seconds	15 pages
P2C	2/10/2023	30 minutes, 18 seconds	11 pages
P3C	4/8/2023	46 minutes, 51 seconds	14 pages
AP1C	2/6/2023	38 minutes, 40 seconds	14 pages
AP2C	3/2/2023	46 minutes, 59 seconds	16 pages
AP3C	4/3/2023	34 minutes, 1 second	11 pages

Table 5 provides the same data for former school administrators of the study district, including the duration of each interview and the length of each transcript in 12-point, single-spaced, Times New Roman font.

Table 5*Data for Interview Sessions With Former School Administrators*

Participant	Date	Duration	Length of transcript
P1F	1/4/2023	47 minutes, 8 seconds	12 pages
P2F	2/11/2023	38 minutes, 18 seconds	13 pages
AP1F	1/23/2023	46 minutes, 5 seconds	16 pages
AP2F	2/9/2023	35 minutes, 13 seconds	12 pages
AP3F	3/10/2023	28 minutes, 10 seconds	11 pages
AP4F	4/3/2023	1 hour, 15 minutes, 40 seconds	17 pages

Focus Group Data

For the focus group, participants were contacted to arrange a time and place to conduct the interview. To facilitate the process of accommodating multiple schedules, several potential dates and times were provided to determine which would work best for all focus group participants. This contact occurred primarily via email correspondence. Participants requested that a virtual focus group be conducted via Zoom since this method was better geared toward their busy schedules. Once a date and time for the focus group was finalized, a Zoom session was set up and the information for the session, including the date, time, and Zoom meeting link, was sent to each individual participant via email. Individual calendar invitations containing the Zoom meeting link were sent to each participant using Microsoft Outlook. To prepare for the focus group, hard copies of the focus group questions were made, and steps were taken to ensure that the portable audio recorder was charged and in good working order.

On the day of the focus group, the Zoom session was launched 20 minutes prior to the start time to ensure that the recording feature was ready. To protect the identity and confidentiality of each focus group participant as much as possible, only one participant was allowed into the Zoom session at a time while all others were held in the virtual waiting room. As each individual participant entered the Zoom session, they were welcomed, and pleasantries were exchanged. Then, the participants' names were changed on the Zoom screen to reflect the pseudonym assigned, and the participants' camera was turned off. Once these steps took place, each participant was sent back to the waiting room until the process was repeated for all participants. These careful steps were followed to protect the participants' anonymity as much as possible. After that, all participants in the waiting room were brought into the session and welcomed. Then, the Zoom recording began, and the prescribed focus group script was followed.

Table 6 describes the date and duration of the focus group, along with the number of pages of 12-point, singled-spaced, Times New Roman font data which the transcription yielded.

Table 6

Data for Focus Group Session With Current and Former School Administrators

Participant	Date	Duration	Length of transcript
Focus Group	4/30/2023	1 hour, 16 minutes, 9 seconds	15 pages

Data Analysis Procedures for the Interviews and Focus Group

Because the focus of this study relied on the perceptions and descriptions received from participants in both interviews and a focus group, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. This analysis followed the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which included becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report. What follows is a detailed description of how each phase of the thematic analysis was conducted.

Phase 1 – Familiarization with the Data

During this phase, an immersion into the data took place in order to become deeply and widely familiar with the content. First, each recording was carefully listened to as it was being transcribed by Otter.ai. Then, once the application generated initial transcripts, the accuracy of each transcription was checked repeatedly, errors were removed, and misreads were corrected. This was done to ensure that the transcripts provided a verbatim account of what participants shared. It should be noted that because Otter.ai is an automated speech to text application, there were numerous errors, so this stage of the process was lengthy. However, this laborious and cumbersome process allowed not only for the reading and rereading of transcripts, but also provided opportunities to listen to the recording repeatedly. This facilitated the search for

meaning and patterns. It was also at this stage that it was noted that the responses from both sources of data were very similar and that because of their similarities, combining both data sources would result in a larger data set to code from, without the focus group data being overpowered, lost, or buried by the interview data. This was discussed with the study's dissertation chair, and the decision was made to conduct one combined analysis of both data sources. There were purposeful efforts made to consider evidence and sample responses from both the interviews and focus group in the development of themes.

Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes

Once deeply familiar with the data, initial codes were produced. Coding was done manually by reading each individual transcript, highlighting codes, and commenting on each code directly on the transcript. Once this process was completed for each interview and focus group transcript, the codes and comments were transferred directly onto a Google spreadsheet, which assisted with analysis and served as an organizational tool. By following this process and using this tool, and with the framework and research questions in mind, the data led to the generation and organization of 948 initial codes (see Appendix I). Upon further reflection, it became apparent that many initial codes referred to the same thing. For example, participant PIC stated that the role was “isolating,” while a participant in the focus group stated that the role of a school administrator was “a lonely position.” Another participant, AP4F, noted that he felt that he was “on his own.” All of these speak to a sense of isolation. Thus, by condensing the data into compact forms of meaning, reflecting on participants' language, and organizing that into relevant groups, the initial codes generated 98 secondary codes/categories (see Appendix J).

Phase 3 – Searching for Themes

During this stage, the secondary codes/categories were sorted and analyzed in an effort to search for broader or overarching themes. The Google spreadsheet served as a helpful visual tool, allowing for careful examination of the relationships between codes and potential initial themes. Each secondary code was looked at in context and then that information was used to develop a collection of possible themes and subthemes. For example, some secondary codes, such as balance, isolation, and compensation, spoke to the challenges that school administrators face within the role, so “challenges of the role” became a potential initial theme. Other secondary codes aligned with the emotional toll that being a school administrator takes on the individual, so data extracts like exhaustion, helplessness, insecurity, and sadness were placed under that potential theme.

It should be noted that organizational themes were developed with the conceptual framework in mind. Self-determination theory (SDT) formed the conceptual framework of this study. SDT seeks to examine conditions that either facilitate or hinder the ability of individuals to flourish in their environments (Ryan & Deci, 2017) in order to better understand how they engage, interpret and act within their context (Deci et al., 2017). It further posits that organizations play a vital role in meeting three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Gagné et al., 2022). As secondary codes were analyzed, SDT was kept at the forefront. For instance, in developing “emotional toll” as a potential theme, how codes like exhaustion and sadness may impact the way in which school administrators act within their context and how those codes and experiences may hinder their basic psychological need for relatedness were considered.

Therefore, after generating a collection of potential themes with SDT in mind, each of the 98 secondary coded extracts were placed within a theme, using the Google spreadsheet as a visual and organizational tool. This process continued until all secondary codes were placed within a developed collection of 17 initial themes. The 17 initial themes were as follows: career progression, challenges of the role, challenges of the work, characteristics needed for the role, community culture, coping skills, district culture, effective support, emotional toll, impact of the work, ineffective support, leadership, nature of the work, relationship between principal/assistant principal, responsibilities, skills needed for the role, and support needed. A table illustrating how each secondary code was placed within and aligned with an initial theme can be found in Appendix K. An expanded and detailed look at sample responses from secondary codes and initial themes can be found in Appendix L.

Phase 4 – Reviewing of Themes

After analyzing and establishing the 17 initial themes from Phase 3, they were carefully combined, collapsed, and refined to generate the following six final themes: career progression, culture, essential characteristics/skills, nature of the work, relationship between principal/assistant principal, support. Special focus was placed on establishing themes within which data came together in a meaningful way and between which there were clear and easily identifiable distinctions that were grounded in the study framework. First, coded extracts for each theme were carefully reviewed to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. For instance, many of the codes within the data set referenced culture. Some mentioned the distinctive culture of the community while others talked about the culture of the district. While these codes talked about subsets of culture, they all ultimately referenced the concept of culture and its impact on the work of school administrators. Thus, the coded extracts of community, district, and leadership

culture were combined to form one final theme: culture. Similarly, there were some coded extracts that did not easily fit into any other theme. An example of that is the theme of career progression. Career progression was mentioned extensively by current and former administrators, as well as by the focus group. However, career progression did not align with other potential final themes, such as support, essential characteristics/skills, or nature of the work. Therefore, and due to the volume of references regarding career progression, it became a final theme. After this step, the themes were carefully reviewed in relation to the data set as a whole. During this phase, the data set was read and reread to ensure that there was a robust data set for each final theme. During this level of analysis, the Google spreadsheet served as a tool, offering a way to visually organize and sort the data to see which themes could be collapsed or combined. This tool also allowed for the quick retrieval of coded extracts and organization within themes. Table 7 shows the condensing of initial into final themes.

Table 7*Initial and Final Themes*

Initial themes	Final themes
Career progression	Career Progression
Community culture	Culture
District culture	
Leadership	
Characteristics needed for the role	Essential Characteristics/Skills
Coping skills	
Skills needed for the role	
Challenges of the role	Nature of the Work
Challenges of the work	
Emotional toll	
Impact of the work	
Nature of the work	
Responsibilities	
Relationship between principal/assistant principal	Relationship between principal/assistant principal
Effective support	Support
Ineffective support	
Support needed	

Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes

The analysis revealed six final themes. These themes were career progression, culture, essential characteristics/skills, nature of the work, relationship between principal and assistant principal, and support. Each theme and its essence are further described and defined below.

Career Progression. The theme of career progression was mentioned repeatedly by both current and former school administrators, primarily as a source of contention, frustration, or as a potential driving factor for attrition. Every current assistant principal, every focus group participant, and four of the six former school administrators mentioned this theme. Career progression can be described in several ways. First, it is the ascension from assistant principal to principal or from principal to a higher level of leadership within the organization. Participant SA2C described it as a “final move or your upward move to the next position and so on.” Career progression can also be defined as having a clear path or pipeline for moving into the next hierarchical level within the profession. Participant SA3C stated that having a clear path means that “you know what is expected and you know the timelines, and you know what is next.”

Career progression impacts the way individuals feel about two premises of SDT: relatedness and competence. AP1F stated that there was no one “advocating for you to be promoted and moved up,” which alludes to a lack of connection with others in the school district. He left the district and entered retirement. Participant AP3C stated that a driving factor for seeking to move into a higher role was to prove that she was indeed competent for her current role. She stated that going through the interview process “really helped me kind of justify where it was, a lot of people were like, well, they just gave her a position.” Participant AP2F stated, “I don’t think that the district thought I was competent enough within the curriculum realm. I thought they thought I didn’t know anything about it. So, I think those two areas are what kept

me from moving.” He left the study district and now serves as a principal in another school district.

Culture. There were over 100 direct or indirect references to culture within the study data. Culture was noted by participants as both a strength and weakness for the study district, and it encompassed a broad range of descriptions. The positive aspects of culture can be defined as the familial, tight-knit, and connected community that the study district fosters. The negative aspects of the study district’s culture can be defined as the way in which it fosters exclusion, disregard for people, and conformity. For instance, the concept of insiders versus outsiders, or being homegrown, was brought up often, and feeling unheard, unseen, unvalued, or unappreciated were also frequently alluded to as a way to describe the district’s culture. There were also references to the use of retaliation to ensure conformity. Another negative element of the study district’s culture revolved around hiring practices. The concept of nepotism or hiring within families was mentioned by participants on multiple occasions, and the data also revealed that when it came to hiring practices, participants felt strongly about ensuring that qualified individuals with experience in school administration were placed in key support positions within the district.

It is important to note that culture impacts the way individuals feel about relatedness, a primary premise of SDT. Participant SA3C stated, “I am an outsider to this district. And, I will say that there’s...not a whole lot of connectedness being built. Those relationships are not necessarily being built or they’re not necessarily fostered at the district level.” Another participant, AP1C, summed up the impact of the study district’s culture and relatedness well:

So, I guess the double-edged sword there is, we are a small district. And so, everybody knows everybody, for the most part. And so, again, that goes to the point of the

superintendent knows my name. The, most of the senior staff knows who I am. And so, they're able to see the work that I'm doing. So, the small community that we have here has been, it's nice to be able to see your superintendent somewhat regularly, to know your senior staff. But the flip side of that is, of course, if you're feeling that you're on the out or if you're feeling that you have a negative connotation attached to you, it can be difficult to shake that because it is such a small community. If one person starts talking about you, then that can spread quickly. Whether there's merit to it or not doesn't matter.

Essential Characteristics and Skills. This theme encompassed the professional skills and personal characteristics that enhance or facilitate the experience of being a school administrator. In some ways, these serve as protective factors, ensuring the longevity of a school administrator's career and serving as mitigators for attrition and burnout. Here too, the data used to describe the theme of essential characteristics and skills was broad, so for the purpose of this study, it was chunked into three parts: professional skills, personal characteristics, and coping skills. Multiple professional skills needed for the role were mentioned by participants in the study. Perhaps the most prevalent skill mentioned was the ability to form relationships. The concept of relationships was referenced 114 times in the data. Another professional skill that participants listed as essential was communication, including the capacity to listen. Among the personal characteristics that participants mentioned were essential to the role were a thick skin, a passion for learning, dedication, work ethic, and motivation. Lastly, the theme of essential characteristics and skills can be defined as school administrators' ability to cope with the challenges and stresses that come with the role.

In analyzing the essential characteristics and skills described, the impact they have on competence as a premise of SDT is evident. For instance, when a school administrator engages

in positive self-talk as a way to cope with the stress of the role, it fosters reassurance that he or she is capable of getting through difficult circumstances. In the same way, when school administrators display motivation to create their own systems of support or when they embrace learning, they are increasing their knowledge and capacity. When their dedication drives them to remain in the profession for decades, they expand their experience and professional repertoire. Therefore, in these ways, the essential characteristics and skills, as defined in this theme, influence competence.

Nature of the Work. The theme of nature of the work was prevalent in this study, with nearly 200 data extracts referring to an element of the work that school administrators carry out. It also revealed that the nature of the work impacts job satisfaction, burnout, and attrition. The theme can be defined in two primary ways. First, it encompasses the challenges inherent to the role and the essence of the work itself. Repeatedly, school administrators recounted that the role of a school administrator is hard. They made statements alluding to the role not being “the easiest job in the world” (Participant P2F) and described it as, “a job that is not for everyone” (Participant AP1C). They consistently spoke of the work being overwhelming. Second, the theme of nature of the work is defined by the emotional toll that the work takes and the impact that it has on school administrators. Many expressed feeling isolated, exhausted, and burned out. They also described the challenge they face in finding a balance between their work and personal lives.

The nature of the work of a school administrator impacts every premises of SDT: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. For instance, several administrators described feeling isolated or lonely due to the nature of their roles. One school administrator, Participant P1C, stated that upon acquiring the role, “you’re handed keys, and that’s about it.” Loneliness has an

impact on relatedness. Participant SA2C, a member of the focus group, described how they are “beat down throughout the school year,” which can impact feelings of competence. Yet another, Participant SA1F, expressed frustration when district leadership overturned decisions that she made. Such actions impact autonomy.

Relationship Between Principal and Assistant Principal. A theme that was revealed in this study, and which had not been addressed in previous literature, is the impact that the relationship between a principal and assistant principal can have, specifically on job satisfaction and attrition. It is important to note that the findings surrounding this theme significantly diverge from the existing body of research, thus extending current knowledge and advancing literature. Half of the former school administrators cited this theme as a primary reason for leaving the role, and four additional administrators cited this theme as a major hindrance to their work. It should be noted that every assistant principal who participated in the study indicated that the nature of the relationship they had with their principal dictated the level of autonomy they were allowed to exercise. Autonomy is one of the major premises of SDT. The relationship between principal and assistant principal can be defined as the interactions that take place and the bond that exists between these two levels of administrators. Fostering a healthy relationship yielded positive outcomes in the workplace, especially for the assistant principal. However, there were also multiple examples of unhealthy relationships between these levels of school administrators, and in such cases, the implications were negative and even toxic.

One interesting finding was that there were two instances of a new principal, with no previous experience in school administration, and a new assistant principal, also with no or little previous school administrator experience, being paired up at the same campus. This posed the unique challenge of both learning their roles at the same time. Of that experience, Participant

P1F stated, “the assistant principal was also first year. So, it was...just going back and forth within each other trying to problem solve. It was, I feel that all year long, we were just problem solving.” Both she and her assistant principal left the study district after one year in their respective roles. Participant AP1C described his experience as follows:

There was some conflict. Because I had, again, I had some experience as an administrator, even though I was an intern, and going back to being micromanaged. She was very much her way or no other way. And, if you didn’t agree, then it could lead to retaliation.

He stated that this constant conflict with his principal hindered his ability to lead and added “much stress” to an already stressful role.

In addition to its impact on autonomy, the relationship between a principal and assistant principal also influences relatedness and competence. When the relationship between a principal and assistant principal is healthy and sound, it facilitates connectedness. For example, Participant AP2C talked about having respect for her principal and receiving support from her, which is indicative of the relatedness that exists between them. Several assistant principals allude to the support, knowledge, and guidance that they receive from their principals or that as principals they impart on their assistant principals. In this way, a healthy relationship between the administrators on a campus fosters competence.

Support. The theme of support, and the differing ways in which it is offered or lacking, was brought up consistently by both current and former school administrators. Support is important not only because of the influence it has on the effectiveness of school administrators, but also because it is directly linked to the SDT premise of competence. Within the data, there were over 150 direct references to this theme. Support is a broad theme, but for the purposes of

this study, it is best defined by analyzing three distinct categories: ineffective support, effective support, and additional support needed. Ineffective support refers to the support that is currently offered but is either not helpful or even wasteful of their time. For instance, several school administrators talked about monthly meetings that the study district has in place as a means of support as being ineffective. Effective support can be defined as support that school administrators find useful or helpful to them and their work. An example of this was the principal supervisor role that was created to support all principals. Lastly, this theme can be defined as the support that school administrators would like to see implemented to facilitate the work that they do. For instance, overwhelmingly, school administrators across the spectrum indicated that they wanted to see more support offered when it came to understanding the budget system and school funding, and they also requested the opportunity to network or collaborate with their peers, as well as a mentor or coach. Lastly, school administrators talked about the need for support to build capacity around social emotional learning.

Phase 6 – Producing the Report

The final report has been generated using the six themes previously defined and identified. Combined, these themes capture the complex story as revealed by the data provided via the 12 individual interviews and focus group. The final themes defined above have been used to answer the research questions in the results below.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators within the district of study in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in turnover rates, why attrition is happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. The data revealed six themes,

including career progression, culture, essential characteristics/skills, nature of the work, relationship between principal and assistant principal, and support. What follows is the results of the study, outlining how these themes have answered the four primary research questions as they pertain to the experiences and perceptions of current and former K-12 school administrators.

Research Question 1

The first research question was as follows: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? Themes 2, 3, and 6 address Research Question 1. Participants indicated that positive aspects of the district's culture, essential characteristics and skills, along with effective support, enhanced their ability to lead a campus.

Regarding the positive aspects of the study district's culture, Participant P1F said, "we're just, we tend to be very...family oriented, and with, very together, the togetherness of everything." Another participant, P1C, stated, "our culture is very familial. We have...in families, you don't sit down and write the rules. You just have an understanding." Participant P3C described it as follows: "it's not big yet, not big enough to, where we still, I think, do have that connected feeling. They do offer a lot of community events for us as, as educators and families to engage in." This positive aspect of the district culture is so deeply engrained that even some former school administrators allude to it. Participant SA1F stated, "I think that the district that we're referring to has so much potential. It is an amazing [district]." Thus, a familial and tight-knit culture helps foster bonds and enhances the experience of school administrators as they carry out their work.

The data also suggested that having the ability to establish relationships, being a good listener, and possessing solid communication skills were necessary for school administrators.

Participant P1C indicated that, “some of the other factors, I think that helped shape the leader that I am is just being able to connect with people,” while Participant P2F stated:

Another one is just dealing with people. I mean, at every, every level, kids are same, but teachers are the same, but they’re different, right? And I think being able to navigate and learn how to deal with people, I think, was the biggest thing for me that I think was beneficial for me.

One participant, AP3F, noted that this skill served as a protective factor, stating, “I had built such a good rapport with all of them, and the families. And... my daughter went to that school for the whole time that I was there. So...that was a piece that really kept me holding on.”

An additional skill noted by participants as essential was listening. Regarding this, Participant P3C stated:

I think one of the most important pieces of being a school administrator is having the capacity to listen to others, be it a student, a parent, or your staff. I think just knowing that people many times want to be heard, and just providing those opportunities has been really key for me.

Along with listening, participants mentioned the importance of communicating with others effectively. For instance, Participant AP1F referenced having hard conversations, saying:

When we had a conversation...we would go at it. I closed that door, we go at it, and they, they appreciate...what I had to say. And sometimes...they were very hard conversations.

But I didn’t hold back, because I knew my job was to better them, to better the people.

Statements made by Participant P1F also supported the importance of communication as a skill.

She indicated:

I don't think that they were used to somebody actually listening to them. So, I'm going to have to say that that was one of my most, I guess, gratifying moments, that I could actually talk to any parent, and we would have a really good conversation, and they would leave happy. Or at least knowing that we were going to have to work together to make things better.

Equally critical in enhancing a school administrator's ability to lead a campus were having a thick skin to help buffer criticism, constantly pursuing learning, displaying a strong level of dedication and work ethic, and being motivated to excel. Regarding the importance of having a thick skin, Participant P1C noted, "however, as far as everyday decisions, we really are given quite a bit of latitude, and now, you have to back it up, and it takes someone with some pretty thick skin to do that," while Participant AP1C stated, "because of the nature of our work, you have to have a thick skin." A passion for learning was also mentioned as a critical factor to success in the role of school administrator, especially when other support systems were lacking. Examples extracted from the data included Participant AP1C, who stated, "I like knowledge for the sake of knowledge. I don't like to not know an answer." Participant P3C said:

I would love to have the opportunity to experience that because I'm a learner, right? Even though I'm in a leadership position, there's a lot of things that I don't know. And there, there's a lot of things that I want to be better at.

Participant P2F also indicated, "the willingness to learn and understand that...the role of a principal is probably not the easiest job in the world but being able to just want to learn."

Dedication and motivation were also referenced repeatedly within the data as necessary in facilitating the work of school administrators. Several, including Participant P2C and Participant P2F, noted their decades of service, while Participant AP2C said she had, "devoted

my career to them.” Interestingly, Participant P1F mentioned dedication as a reason for leaving the profession. She stated:

So, at the end of the day, it was a personal decision to go and enjoy the moment with my daughter and give somebody else the opportunity to take over that campus rather than...kind of giving them half of my, my dedication. I couldn't do that.

Similarly, participants often displayed characteristics of being self-motivated to persist and succeed in the role. Participant P1C described how she created her own support since it did not exist at the district level, stating:

You have to learn how to work around it and create things for them. That then becomes their brainchild, which they get credit for as a system of the district, and that's okay because I care about what I do.

Others used that innate motivation to drive their work. For example, Participant AP1F stated:

If you're going to be an administrator, you're not in it for the money, first and foremost...you're not. You're there for the children's sake. A lot of administrators do a lot of work. It's a hard, unglorified job.

Thus, dedication and motivation served as factors enhancing a school administrator's ability to carry out the functions of their role.

The ability to cope with the challenges and stresses of the work was also vital to continuing the work involved in leading a campus. To do so, school administrators relied on their faith, optimism, a positive outlook, self-talk, and gratitude. Participant P1C said, “my faith got me through it,” and Participant AP2C stated, “I have to remind them like, okay, especially if they're believers, I said, remember, we don't work for the district. We work for the Lord, and I really have had to rely on that quite a bit.” Others relied on maintaining a positive outlook. For

instance, one participant, P3C, referenced looking at “the glass half full,” while Participant AP1C stated, “you have to remember to not let the negative outweigh the good.” Additional examples of this included comments made by Participant P2C, “I’m hopeful,” and by Participant P2F, “it was [disheartening], it’s still...I look back, but...everything happens for a reason.” Another participant, P1F, displayed positive self-talk in repeatedly stating “I can do it,” and gratitude was also mentioned as a protective factor, evident in comments such as, “so I’m grateful for that,” made by Participant AP3C.

There were also areas of support that school administrators indicated enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus. Primary among these was the responsive and ongoing support provided by individual departments within the divisions of curriculum and instruction and administration and human resources. Participant AP3F stated, “there was always somebody in central office that would kind of give you like a map or guide,” while Participant P2C described how “our curriculum office is continually checking in with myself, with our teachers, offering support. I think anytime I’ve had to call pupil services, HR, and...they, their response is immediate.” The principal supervisor, or director of schools, role was also mentioned as a bright spot, offering support that was especially helpful. Of this support, Participant P2C said:

We have regular scheduled meetings every other week, where she does check-ins, but also she’s there just anytime I need the support or have a question. She is...just a phone call away. She’s here at our campus anytime we need her. But, she’s also, when we do meet, she...we have a structured agenda where she’s checking in.

It is important to note that while this support was beneficial, school administrators asserted that it was only effective when the “right people,” namely those with school administrator experience,

were in the role, as asserted by Participant P1C. Also, this type of support was only provided to principals within the study district, not to assistant principals. Thus, the positive aspects of culture, essential characteristics and skills, and effective support enhanced a school administrator's ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus.

Research Question 2

The second research question was as follows: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? Themes 2, 4, and 6 address Research Question 2. The data suggested that the culture established within the district and the nature of the work significantly hinder the ability of school administrators to lead a campus. It also found that some current systems of support were more of a hindrance than a help.

Regarding the negative aspects of the study district's culture, participants alluded to the practice of hiring family members or those without school administrator experience for pivotal roles. It was repeatedly mentioned that this nepotism makes it hard to hold people accountable because doing so can lead to repercussions. Participant AP4F stated that he often saw family and friends of those in leadership being "put in certain positions." He further indicated that such practices made it difficult to hold individuals accountable for their work due to their connections to those in power. Participant SA3C agreed that "many family members work" within the study district. He relayed the following:

I've seen examples of, essentially, secretaries and paraprofessionals sidestepping head principal's directives and going to either a board member or a high-level central office administrator, and they'll just say, oh, it's okay. I'll just see them at church tomorrow, and I'll tell them about this. Or, you'll, I've even seen secretaries go around their own

principals because they say, oh, well, I'm related to such and such. I'm not going to worry about it. I'm kind of like, huh. That's a, I, you know, bite my lip on that one. But, it's kind of telling.

Participants also stated that they perceive that district leadership does not understand the needs of a campus. They indicated that this can be attributed to a lack of presence and to hiring leaders who have never served as school administrators. For instance, to explain a perceived lack of presence, some alluded to a disconnect between district leadership and campuses. The phrase, "they don't see" was used by several participants, including P1C, P3C, and AP3C, to describe how district leaders do not visit campuses often, and this keeps them from fully understanding their needs. Participants AP1F, P2F, and P3C indicated that district leaders only visited certain campuses, and they perceived that lower performing or high needs campuses were sometimes ignored. Participants also felt strongly about ensuring that qualified individuals with experience in school administration were placed in key support positions within the district. Among those who expressed such perceptions were Participant P1C and Participant P2F. They also questioned how individuals who lacked qualifications or experience were moved into certain roles. Of this, Participant AP3C stated, "So, sometimes, I don't think it's necessarily because of the credentials or because of the experience. I think it's just, a lot of it is because they, I don't know. I don't know what it is." Another participant, SA1F, said, "The people who do work at Central Office, like, just remember, like, one, if you've never been a campus administrator, and again, anonymity, right, it would behoove you to have served in that role at some point."

Second, the nature of the work hindered school administrators' ability to lead. The role of a school administrator is not easy. The workload was repeatedly described as overwhelming and never ending. School administrators were therefore faced with the challenge of juggling multiple

responsibilities simultaneously and feeling as though they could never finish or keep up with the demands. The workload also hindered their ability to focus on developing as leaders or giving adequate attention to their role as instructional leaders. To describe the workload, they used phrases like “astronomical” (Participant AP3F). Participant AP1F stated, “there’s just not enough time in a day, and for assistant principals, it’s a never-ending job,” while Participant AP2C said that she worked “like a burro,” or donkey. One participant, P1C, shared that she often put in 12-hour days, worked regularly on Saturdays, and there had been times, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, that she had opted to spend the night at school. She recounted:

I will tell you the 2 years that we had COVID in existence for schools, there are, there were three nights in particular, I will tell you, I did sleep at school. I was there until close to midnight. I knew I’d have to be back at five to spray down the schools. It was scary.

It is important to note that other administrators alluded to the additional work that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant P2F stated that the COVID-19 pandemic made a hard job even harder and stressed that the political climate and challenges posed as a result of the pandemic took a lot out of him.

Being a school administrator was also described as isolating, and there were multiple references to the challenge of finding balance. For example, Participant SA1F spoke of feeling isolated, referring to the role as a “lonely position.” Participant P2C stated that it was challenging to set boundaries, with work life often bleeding into home life because of the overwhelming workload. This was echoed by Participant SA1F, who stated, “the biggest challenge right now is balance. And so, what I mean by that is not only like work life balance, for me personally, as a mom, as a wife, you know, as an administrator, but also just balance.” Participant AP1C

indicated that he struggled with taking days off when he knew there was still hard work to be done.

Lastly, the data indicated that when ineffective support systems were put in place, they hindered, rather than facilitated, the work of a school administrator. One example was the study district's current format for and schedule of meetings. Participant AP2F suggested that these meetings were typically held in the early morning and at each one, various topics were discussed. Participant AP3F stated that district leadership was always present. However, participants indicated that these meetings were not an effective means of support for two reasons. The first was they were informational in nature and did not allow for time to network, collaborate with peers, or problem solve. One school administrator, Participant AP1C, stated that these meetings were:

Not really a support system as much as it's, we're rolling out a new initiative, here's some information. It's almost like a faculty meeting. Whereas I feel that if they offered something that was more specific or more oriented toward the role that we're in, it would be more beneficial.

Participant P1C described the meetings as follows: "I haven't been to a meeting yet where we are allowed to speak. They speak, and you listen." Still others expressed that these meetings were counterproductive because they took them away from their campuses, which is where they felt they needed to be. Regarding this topic, Participant P2C stated, "there's a lot of meetings, time away from the campus as well as outside of the classroom that ideally, I would rather be in the classroom with teachers on a, on a daily, and students, on a daily basis." Participant P3C expressed:

I think so many times we're given different meetings to attend. And, I don't think they take into account how important it is to physically be on the campus, that being off the campus, I think really hinders my ability to kind of lead. I just, when I look at my calendar for, like, at the end of the year, I'm just like, oh, my goodness. I spent...so many days and hours off.

In these ways, the negative aspects of the study district's culture, the nature of the work, and ineffective support were a hindrance to a school administrator's ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus.

Research Question 3

The third research question was as follows: How do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district describe the factors that contribute to attrition? Themes 1, 2, 4, and 5 address Research Question 3. The study found that the factors that contribute to attrition include a lack of career progression, the culture within the study district, the nature of the work of a school administrator, and the relationship between principals and assistant principals.

School administrators are driven to succeed, and as such, they have a desire to advance in their careers. They expressed frustration at not having clearly defined paths for upward mobility, feeling as though the expectations were constantly shifting, and the perception that they were not being given equal access to interview for higher positions. Over half of the school administrators who left the study district did so to become principals or district leaders, and they were able to attain such positions elsewhere. This theme also suggests that career progression is a contributing factor to job satisfaction. For example, AP2C stated that she has devoted her 25-year career to the study district and has not been given the opportunity to move into a principal role despite her numerous contributions. This has impacted her job satisfaction, so she has interviewed for

principal positions in other school districts. In speaking about seeking career advancement elsewhere, she stated, “And so, it’s kind of sad if I put it in that perspective. So, I’m trying not to. I’m trying to say, like, I deserve more.” Career progression is also a contributing factor to attrition. Participant P2F left the study district after serving as a principal because, after many years of service, he applied for a position and was not offered an interview. He stated, “when I saw other people getting interviews that have never been a campus admin, never been a principal, even an assistant principal, I took that, I was offended by that. Very offended.” He left the study district and now serves in one of the highest levels of central office leadership in another school district. Participants also indicated that a lack of clear career progression was a challenge. SA1F stated, “I always felt like the finish line was moving, constantly moving. It was like, oh, like, you’re next for this role. But then, but wait, this, this and this, like, it was moving.”

Participants expressed that the culture of the study district was another factor contributing to attrition. They referenced an organizational mentality of having outsiders and homegrown staff. It was even alluded to by Participant SA1F that unless outsiders acclimated, they were unlikely to last. Participant AP4F stated, “I’m an outsider...I’m not, I didn’t come to this high school or anything like that, or I wasn’t born, I was not born, you know, not raised in the district or anything like that.” Another participant, SA3C, described it as follows:

It seems to be that a good portion of it either, either falls into two categories of, you were born here, you were raised here, you came back to work here, which happens in every district, but it is very prevalent in this district from top to bottom. It is very prevalent. Or, the other side of the coin, of is kind of misery loves company. Like, you’re in this together. So, you’re either in this together, or you were born and raised within this, and to me that all still goes back to culture.

This makes a lonely position even more so and impacts retention.

Regarding culture, school administrators also expressed feeling unheard, unseen, or unappreciated, exacerbating burnout and driving attrition. Participant AP1F stated, “I was a ghost,” and Participant AP2F said, “we didn’t have a voice.” One poignant example of feeling unvalued was provided by Participant AP2C. She recounted an incident that transpired after their secretary died. She stated:

Like, how disrespectful is that? Like, she was with us over 30 years, but yet you’re gonna go post her job in less than 24 hours? And so, that was very enlightening, because it’s like, well, shit, if I died today, I, I’ll be replaced tomorrow...So then...I realized...the job is not worth me killing myself over it.

A final element of culture that the data suggested impacts attrition was conformity forged through retaliation. Participant AP2F stated, “I made it known [that he disagreed]. And, I think that went out into the people that make decisions, and that he’s not a team player. So, therefore, he doesn’t believe in our system.” Participant SA1F described another incident, stating, “you asked me to give you feedback on this. I gave you feedback on it. And, just believe me when I say, I’m never gonna give you authentic feedback again, because there was a consequence for that.” This was further supported by statements from Participant SA2C, who said:

So, I used to say what’s on my mind...and if you’re from here, you’re from here, and if you’re not from, you’re not, and I’m not. So, I don’t play favorites, and I’m the same way with student one, parent one, to parent 25, or whatever number, right? So...it is what it is, but I don’t play that game. And unfortunately...sometimes that affects you.

Another factor impacting attrition is simply the nature of the work. As has been frequently stated, the work and role of an administrator is hard. It comes with long hours,

unreasonable workloads, and unending demands. One former school administrator, Participant P1F, described the role as taxing, stating, “it’s very exhausting. It’s very, there’s moments when it’s very depressing, because you can only do so much, and you want to do it all.” Yet another, Participant AP4F, captured the sentiment in this way:

I would have to sit down and...get testing done, or get LPAC done in a correct way or it could have been special ed or...ARDs and things like that. And, I was always being pulled...to the left and to the right. I couldn't sit down and focus on the testing the way I should have been focusing or the LPACs the way it should have been focusing or the 504s the way they should have been run...because then they're, the radio's going on. We need you over here. Or we have...it's, I felt like I was always putting out fires.

Further exacerbating the challenges that come with the nature of the work is the current salary structure for school administrators in the study district. Participant P1C stated, “I did an analysis last year of my income if I were hourly, and I made \$15.80 an hour for the hours that I worked last year. That is a direct insult on my profession.” Along that same thread, Participant AP1C said:

When I first moved into this role, I took a huge pay cut because of the stipends that I had as a lead teacher for doing student, for leading student organizations, as well as other responsibilities like tech facilitator. So, I took about a seven to \$10,000 pay cut.

Others, like Participant SA1F, described how they know of colleagues who have left the profession for lower paying jobs but are now “healthier.” Participant AP4F left the role of assistant principal to become a teacher and coach, and he stated that he makes the same amount of income as he did as an administrator.

Combined, the challenges described take a personal and emotional toll and contribute to exhaustion, burnout, and consequently, attrition. Participant AP1C talked about days when he felt “beat down” and described the role as “emotionally exhausting.” Participant P2F described the toll of criticism as hard on him and his family. Several referenced moments in which they broke down crying, including Participant P1C and Participant AP1F. Two participants, P1C and AP3F, stated that the emotional toll of the work had impacted their marriages and families, saying, “I lost my marriage over it” and “I ended up losing my marriage because of it. I never saw my family” respectively. This emotional toll impacted the outlook and mindset of many administrators. For example, Participant P3C mentioned that it was sometimes hard to see the fruits of her labor, while Participant SA2C asserted, “I mean we adjust, right, to make it work, and we continue on, but what's the payoff for us?”

Lastly, the relationship between principals and assistant principals was found to be a factor that contributes to attrition. This singular relationship greatly influences the experience that an assistant principal has in multiple areas. Participant AP3F cited an unhealthy relationship with her principal as a primary reason for leaving the study district. She stated that she and her principal were like “oil and water” from the onset, and despite multiple pleas and transfer requests, she was forced to stay. That led to a relationship that “blew up very quickly and escalated” and “that’s why, what made me leave.” Participant AP4F stated that there were numerous complaints about his principal, that her behavior often “harmed others,” and that the issues it caused “were obvious.” He further recounted that the situation was a “debacle,” and he decided, “I'm just tired. I'm just burnt out, and I left. I resigned. And that was a big decision, because I had been there for like, already 14-15 years.” Yet another assistant principal, Participant AP1F, indicated that he and his principal had different philosophies, that this led to a

lot of “friction,” and that this dynamic was a primary reason why he made the painful decision to leave the profession.

The relationship between the principal and assistant principal also dictated the level of autonomy that was given, the level of training received, and the latitude assistant principals had to be instructional leaders. Among the many comments regarding the impact of the principal and assistant principal on autonomy, Participant AP2F stated that autonomy:

Depended on who was in the principal's role because I had principals in that same role that would say, tell me about what we need, go do it. It was, you gave me a lot of autonomy to attack a problem. But, other people that sat in that same chair it's like, you don't, you don't even send a letter out without me knowing it.

Participant SA2C noted that the scope of what he was allowed to do and latitude he had as an assistant principal depended on “what type of principal you have.” Similarly, some of the principals interviewed expressed how they mentored, supported, trained, and gave autonomy to their assistant principals in an effort to further grow leaders, including Participant P1C and Participant P3C. Participant AP3C noted that she felt comfortable going to her principal to discuss major decisions and to problem solve. Another, Participant P1C, credited her previous principal for mentoring her when she was an assistant principal and preparing her for the principal role she now holds. Participant AP3F shared a similar experience, stating that, “the first principal, he was, he was amazing. He, he did actually give me a voice of making decisions and implementing them, and I felt...pretty much like an equal to him.” These were all indicative of the positive effects of a healthy relationship between principals and assistant principals. However, when there were philosophical, leadership, managerial, or personal differences between these two levels of administrators, job satisfaction and attrition were greatly impacted.

In these ways, the data indicated that career progression, negative aspects of the study district's culture, the nature of the work, and the relationship between principals and assistant principals were factors that contributed to attrition.

Research Question 4

The last research question was, what systems of support do K-12 administrators in the study district perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities? Theme 6 addresses Research Question 4. Participants were resoundingly clear on the systems of support that they perceive would better assist them in their roles. Their responses indicated that they want focus support to better understand the budget and funding sources. Participant AP2C said that as an assistant principal, she was “clueless” about the budget, and Participant P3C stated that exposure to the budget prior to ascending to the principal role was non-existent. The concept and need for support in this area was summed up best by Participant SA3C in this way:

I think I can make kind of a general statement for this district in that APs in general do not touch budgets. I don't get to touch the budget. I don't even get to see the budget. I don't get any of that. But, if you have an entire district in which the APs are not allowed to touch or see budget, and they're going to one day theoretically...be administrators, I mean that's, it seems like a poor method of planning for the future for your growth in the district if your future leaders are going to one day be handed a budget and not have ever seen it before. So, if let's say, I ever decide I want to be an administrator further on in this district, head of my own campus, there has been no internal discussion or training over that. To me, that's kind of a vital skill.

They also indicated that they want the opportunity to network and collaborate with their peers. Participant SA1F stated that being a school administrator is a “lonely job,” while

Participant P1F indicated that “a lot of times you experience so many different things that, you have no idea if it's normal, and, you kind of just want to share and talk to somebody just to get an input.” Both participants said that having a group of peers to bounce ideas off of, to problem solve with, or simply to vent with would be helpful. Others concurred. For example, Participant P2F stated that one of the things that was most helpful was being able to call and learn from colleagues, while Participant AP2F said that the camaraderie offered by a networking group would enhance trust and combat feelings of isolation.

School administrators also want to see purposeful attempts by the study district to establish a system of mentorship to enhance their operational knowledge and dedicated coaching to refine their leadership skills. Participant AP4F recounted how he would have greatly benefited from having a mentor to guide him and to learn from, and Participant AP1C stated that when he stepped into the role, “there wasn’t much mentorship.” Even principals stressed the need for mentorship. Participant P1F indicated:

I think that was what was hard, is that being a first-year administrator, I would think I would have that mentor that I could go to and run...my ideas or my whatever situation or whatever decision...that I needed to make, so that I could get some input.

Still other school administrators felt it was important to not only have mentors to aid with the role and operations, but to also have coaches to develop them as leaders. Participant P3C asserted:

So, I think one of the things that I would love to see is just to have scheduled meetings, or at least have, like, once a month, and then kind of have the topic to cover. I think I would like it to be not just a mentor, but more of a coaching, like, a coaching person, like

somebody to help coach me through my leadership kind of journey. I think that will be super important.

One principal, Participant P1C, had the benefit of having an executive coach while participating in a program that the study district partnered with called Holdsworth. She indicated that the opportunity to have a coach had been wonderful and allowed her the opportunity to develop as a leader. Of the experience, she said:

It changed me in my leadership and really helped me focus on my talents as a leader, and then how to use those superpowers to lead a charge. And I really, really wish that our district did a better job, and this is not a knock on them because I'm part of this too, and maybe someday I'll sit in that seat. But I hope that we recognize the true impact that principals have or negatively have on a campus because I really do believe that there is power in having a really transformational leader on a campus level.

Lastly, school administrators indicated that they want to build capacity around how best to support the social emotional needs of the children, youth, and adults under their care. School administrators stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a significant impact on students and teachers. Of the impact it had on students, Participant AP1C said:

We have more work to do as a result of the pandemic. Students have not been socialized. We had students who came to school this year as eighth graders who had never set foot on a middle school campus. And so, there's a lot of things that we didn't necessarily account for in that initial response. We were worried about instruction, academics. But, now we're seeing that students weren't socialized. They don't know how to behave in social settings. We have a lot of students with anxiety that's being reported or diagnosed.

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on adults was also evident. In one particularly powerful moment, Participant PIC stated the following:

You know, I'm a pretty sturdy person by nature, been through some pretty tough times in my life, and I think that that helped me to stay strong. But I will tell you, after that year was over, there was mental breakdown. There was. I, my AP did have a nervous breakdown twice at school. I had two teachers have a heart attack. Four teachers lost their husbands. I had one teacher lose her child. I mean you're not prepared for those. Oh, it makes me all emotional. You are not prepared as a principal to take care of the people. I thought I'd be taking care of a school, children, HR issues, gum on the floor...fights, maybe a bad word or two. But never did I think I would be prepared for the amount of social, emotional, and mental counseling that I would be forced to do and had no clue how to do it. That's what exhausted me.

This collective trauma has affected school administrators as well. For instance, Participant AP2C recounted:

Last year, it was compassion fatigue, because you heard all these horrible stories from these kids, you know? And it was like, oh, my God, how do we help this kid? So last year, disciplining a student looked different than prior to COVID, and it looked different from this year. This year, we can kind of go back to the way it was a little bit more so. But, last year, you couldn't just discipline a kid. You had to ask why. Like, where was this pain coming from?

It is important to note that, except for the two principals who had served as counselors prior to becoming campus leaders, all other school administrators who participated in this study indicated

that they had had little to no training on how to support the social emotional needs of students and staff.

Summary

Chapter 4 addressed how this qualitative study was conducted to achieve its purpose and answer the established research questions. The purpose of the study was to examine the perspectives of school administrators at Study Independent School District in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in turnover rates, why attrition is happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support are accelerating departures. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted using interview and focus group data and following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. The inductive thematic analysis provided six final themes: career progression, culture, essential characteristics/skills, nature of the work, relationship between principal and assistant principal and support. These themes were then applied and used to answer the four primary research questions posed within the study. The answers to Research Question 1 were provided by Themes 2, 3 and 6, while the answers to Research Question 2 were addressed by Themes 2, 4, and 6. Themes 1, 2, and 4 answered Research Question 3, and lastly, the answers to Research Question 4 were found in Theme 6. Chapter 5 will focus on a discussion regarding the results revealed in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The role of a school administrator is not easy. It is fraught with challenges as these individuals lead teachers, support students, engage parents, and look after the safety of everyone in their care (Brown et al., 2022; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018; Reinke et al., 2019). Because of the broad and varied nature of their roles, school administrators need robust training and targeted support, yet they report that educational leadership preparation and in-district systems of support are often lacking, resulting in high attrition and instability (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Truong, 2019). Furthermore, the inability of work organizations to meet the basic psychological needs of their employees may be exacerbating retention challenges and hindering the development of autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators at Study Independent School District in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in turnover rates, why attrition is happening at such high levels, and to determine whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. Answers to four primary research questions were sought: What do school administrators consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? What do they consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus? How do they describe the factors that contribute to attrition? What systems of support do they perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities? What follows is an exploration and interpretation of the meaning of the results as they relate to the research questions and past literature. The relationship between the theoretical framework and the findings are also addressed, and recommendations for practice and future research are provided.

Discussion of the Findings

This section focuses on providing an overview of the findings as they relate to the study's research questions, past literature, and the theoretical framework. The research questions guiding this study were centered on the factors that facilitate or hinder the ability of school administrators to carry out the functions of leading a campus, what they perceive contributes to attrition, and what support would best assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities.

Research Question 1

RQ 1 asked the following: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

Participants referenced the close, tight-knit, and familial culture of the study district as a factor that facilitates leading a campus. They described how the size of the study district allows school administrators to have close contact with other personnel, including those in district-level leadership. Participant PIC stated that because there are only 17 principals, the superintendent invests time into getting to know them and the needs of their campuses. She indicated that she felt comfortable approaching him to share ideas and discuss concerns, something that is not often possible in larger school districts. Others, including Participants P1F and P3C, alluded to how the familial nature of the school district allows them to connect with the community. When the study district sponsors community events and brands itself as being part of the community, school administrators are better able to build relationships with parents. Past literature indicates that school administrators are tasked with maintaining relationships with parents in order to promote school engagement, which is defined as purposeful interactions between families and schools that support the overall development of students (Smith et al., 2021). Such engagement

improves academic outcomes (Jasis, 2021) and provides social, behavioral, and academic benefits for students (Reinke et al., 2019). Therefore, by fostering a close, familial culture, school districts may facilitate the work of school administrators.

Another factor that enhances the ability of school administrators to carry out the functions of leading a campus are the personal characteristics and skills that they possess. For instance, participants often referenced relationship building and communication skills as being vital to the role. As past literature indicates, school administrators are tasked with engaging in the learning that takes place on a campus (Neumerski et al., 2018) and building teacher capacity (Skaalvik, 2020), and in order to do so, they must be able to establish rapport and effectively communicate with their staff. The ability to cope with stress and challenges is another essential characteristic or skill. Participants talked about many different ways in which they do so, and how that keeps them going when the work is hard. For instance, some participants discussed how they rely on their faith, remaining positive, gratitude, and even self-talk to keep going when challenges arise.

Lastly, and overwhelmingly, participants exhibited a passion for learning. This drive for knowledge is what they often relied on when gaps in training were present. They discussed relying on colleagues, district staff, and even external consultants to find the answers they needed when district support or past training were lacking. This facilitated their work and kept them going in the profession. This characteristic may be especially useful in that, as the role of a school administrator continues to evolve, there are increasing gaps in training. For example, past literature indicates that principals see their role in supporting teachers evolving in the future as the emphasis on mental and emotional health increases (Reid, 2021). Yet, they are often not trained in topics related to social-emotional learning. A school administrator who is driven to

learn may be better able to adjust and seek answers as the role evolves. What this means is that in order to enhance the possibility of longevity among school administrators, school districts must evaluate and carefully assess whether candidates for the role exhibit these essential characteristics and skills.

One last factor that this study indicated enhances the ability of school administrators to carry out the function of leading a campus was specific support systems. Primary among them was the ongoing and readily responsive nature of individual district-level departments. Repeatedly, participants mentioned how quickly and easily they were able to find answers or guidance when they reached out to departments within the curriculum and instruction, as well as the administration and human resources divisions. Participants also appreciated the role of the principal supervisor in checking in and offering mentorship and coaching support, but keeping this support exclusively for principals and the relative newness of this position limited its potential impact. Still, those who spoke of the support, such as Participants P2F, P1C, and P2C, touted its importance and benefits. These systems of support are critical because school administrators are tasked with making informed decisions about how to support teachers, provide professional development, and utilize available staff to assist with the development of teachers in specific practice areas (McBrayer et al., 2020). Therefore, having the ability to call on readily available district-level departments or engaging in ongoing development with a principal supervisor is beneficial, and school districts should strive to provide such useful support.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked the following: What do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

It was interesting to note that while the positive aspects of the study district's culture were found to enhance a school administrator's role, the more negative aspects of the organization's culture were found to be a significant hindrance. For instance, nearly every participant made references to the study district's questionable hiring practices. They alluded to perceived rampant nepotism and how having staff who are related to or close friends with school board members and district leaders makes it challenging to uphold accountability. For example, Participant SA3C and Participant AP4F spoke about how they had witnessed secretaries, paraprofessional, and other staff disregard directives from school administrators, and Participant SA1F alluded to having her "hand slapped" for trying to hold a school board member's relative accountable for unacceptable behavior. Past literature indicates that interactions and relationships among staff and students create a positive climate that increases job satisfaction and decreases turnover (Liu & Bellibas, 2018). The inability to properly manage staff fosters a negative climate and hinders the ability of a school administrator to effectively do his or her job.

Another finding that arose was the hiring of individuals without school administrator experience to district-level positions, especially to roles that directly support campus leaders. Participants spoke with frustration about how it was hard to understand why such individuals were hired, alluding to how such practices are not only unfair but also make their jobs more challenging. To that point, participants indicated that when district leaders without school administration experience are hired, those leaders lack a clear understanding of the nature and challenges of the work that they do. Such leaders then make decisions or pass initiatives that, rather than facilitate, hinder their ability to carry out their roles and responsibilities. Past research findings indicate that school administrators benefit from having experienced individuals mentor and guide them (Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). It not only contributes to self-efficacy but also allows

for the acquisition of practical skills (Hildreth et al., 2018). In that way, hiring inexperienced district leaders may stunt the growth and hinder the development of school administrators. What this suggests is that school districts should carefully evaluate their current hiring practices to ensure that instances of nepotism or preferential hiring, as well as the hiring of individuals who lack campus leadership experience to key support roles, are minimized.

A major hindrance to leading a campus is the overwhelming volume of work that school administrators are faced with. Every participant in this study spoke of its impact. They described the work as being astronomical, never-ending, and impossible to keep up with. Many alluded to the extremely long hours they spend working on campus and even at home, and they discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic contributed considerably to the workload, both while it was occurring and after students returned to campuses. Participants spoke about how difficult it was to find balance when faced with an overwhelming workload, and they alluded to how isolated and lonely they felt. These findings are in alignment with what literature states about the role of a campus administrator. Vaisben (2018) asserted that the role is demanding while Gimbel and Kefor (2018) stated that it is fraught with complex challenges. Wiczorek and Manard (2018) described how school administrators may feel overwhelmed, and Gimbel and Kefor (2018) posited that they are often left to navigate their roles in isolation. Thus, the perceptions of participants regarding the nature of the work aligns with past research. What this indicates is that school districts should carefully assess and consider the scope of the work of a school administrator and strive to develop ways to distribute the workload more equitably, to streamline workflow, and to evaluate whether district initiatives are making a positive impact or merely adding additional strain to overworked campus leaders. Furthermore, they should provide

opportunities for school administrators to connect with others in similar roles to mitigate the impact of isolation.

One last hindrance to leading a campus is the meeting format that the study district currently has in place as a support system. Repeatedly, participants described how the current structure and frequency of meetings make work harder for them. They described the meetings as informational in nature, irrelevant to their roles, and as having a sit-and-get format, where they sit and listen as district leadership speaks. Participants stated that they would prefer to have a format that allows them to collaborate with and speak to their peers. They described how being able to discuss the challenges they are facing may help normalize the situations they encounter and the frustrations that they are feeling. Such an approach would allow them to problem solve, generate new ideas, and find fresh perspective regarding challenges they are facing on their campuses. The frequency of the meetings was also described as a hindrance because it takes school administrators away from where they need to be, namely on campus. These findings align with what past literature states. Gimbel and Kefor (2018) asserted that administrators benefit from discussion, collaboration, and reflection. Bowers (2017) stated that school administrators benefit from peer support and professional communities of practice. In regard to presence on campus, Neumerski et al. (2018) stressed that low visibility of a campus leader drives the breakdown of relationships with teachers and increases the stress and potential for burnout among school administrators. Thus, school district leadership would be wise to restructure the current format and frequency of their meetings and consider including ample time for peer collaboration, discussion, and problem solving.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked the following: How do current and former K-12 school administrators in the study district describe the factors that contribute to attrition?

Participants described multiple factors that contribute to attrition. One contributing factor, cited by participants who were both current and former school administrators, was a lack of career progression. They expressed frustration at unclear or constantly shifting expectations for upward mobility and alluded to a lack of career progression as impacting their job satisfaction and driving them to seek opportunities elsewhere. In fact, five of the seven former school administrators and over half of the current assistant principals who participated in the study mentioned career progression. Over half of the school administrators who left the district of study expressed that they had tried to seek higher positions in the study district, but after making attempts, being denied opportunities, not being supported in their endeavors, or becoming frustrated with not having a clear path forward, they left the study district. Going to another school district led to what they sought: some became principals, others moved into district leadership, and one attained an assistant superintendency.

In their research, Liu and Bellibas (2018) indicated that job satisfaction results from an awareness of how a role fulfills values and from the perceptions and expectations that one has about the role, while organizational commitment is the psychological attachment a person has to an organization as well as its goals, values, and success. Thus, when there is a lack of career progression opportunities or when expectations are unclear, both job satisfaction and organizational commitment decrease. This, in turn, drives attrition. It was interesting to note that when Participant AP1F left the study district, he indicated that 15 teachers also left the campus. This aligns with the findings of DeMatthews et al. (2022) who found that schools that experience

leadership turnover have spikes in teacher turnover as well. The findings indicate that implications are clear: to mitigate attrition, school districts must invest time and effort into creating clearly defined career progression pipelines and ensure that expectations for upward mobility are explicitly communicated. A failure to do so will further increase turnover.

Another factor that is contributing to attrition is the negative aspects of the organization's culture. Nearly every participant alluded to a pervasive mentality of insiders and outsiders, of those who are homegrown and those who have joined the system from outside of the community. Many feel unheard, unseen, or unappreciated. Still other participants discussed a culture of conformity that is crafted through retaliatory practices. Liu and Bellibas (2018) found that mutual respect is a factor that drives job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Therefore, when the study district condones, promotes, or disregards the aforementioned negative cultural aspects, school administrators are less likely to find satisfaction in the work or feel committed to the organization. What this means is that school districts must be purposeful in dismantling the mentality of "us versus them" and instead, promote a mindset of unity. They must also strive to truly see, hear, and value their school administrators through either presence or recognition programs. And lastly, school districts must set clear boundaries and consequences to combat retaliation while creating safe spaces where feedback is encouraged and valued.

The present study suggested that the nature of the work of a school administrator is another factor that contributes to attrition for two reasons. The first is because the work takes a personal and emotional toll and contributes to exhaustion and burnout. Every participant expressed feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Many alluded to emotional breakdowns. The impact on their families was also evident. Two participants stated that they had lost their marriages and families as a direct result of the role, and all others alluded to the work negatively

impacting their spouses or families. Such emotional exhaustion and ongoing fatigue are central dimensions of burnout and long-term stress (Saalvik, 2020), all of which take a toll on school administrators. The second is because of the current compensation and salary structure in the study district. Two-thirds of the participants directly cited compensation as a driver of attrition. Many talked about taking pay cuts when they moved into the school administrator role. They described how there are teachers on campus that make more than they do or how the compensation is not commensurate with the amount of work and hours they dedicate to the role. This further exacerbates the personal and emotional toll that the nature of the work takes on school administrators.

These findings suggest that school districts must do a better job of promoting and modeling healthy work/life balance. Because school administrators are often highly driven, disconnecting from work can be a challenge for them, so school districts should set policies in place that promote and encourage taking time off, but most importantly, they must evaluate and assess current workloads, find ways to distribute them more effectively, and consider eliminating work items that are not essential. For instance, Participant AP4F discussed how the study district mandates that a full evaluation be conducted for every teacher every year even though that is not required by the Texas Education Agency. Several participants also stated that a lack of communication and coordination between district level leaders and departments creates more work for them. Some participants alluded to walkthrough quotas, whereby school administrators are directed to conduct a certain number of classroom visits every week. School districts should reevaluate such policies and practices to help minimize the toll that the nature of the work takes on school administrators and to mitigate attrition. And lastly, the findings suggest that school districts would be wise to reevaluate the current salary structure for school administrators. They

should not be taking pay cuts to ascend to demanding roles that carry such a high level of work and responsibility.

An interesting finding revealed within the study is that the relationship between principals and assistant principals contributes to attrition. Half of the participants who left the study district cited it as a factor that ultimately influenced them to leave, and four others indicated that this factor was a major hindrance to their work. Even current administrators talked about how that singular relationship impacts the level of training, support, and autonomy that they receive. Of special interest were two distinct cases where a new principal with no prior school administration experience was paired with a new assistant principal with no prior school administration experience. In both cases, the experiences were less than favorable, and out of those four school administrators, only one still works within the study district. It is also interesting to note that other than the impact of the relationship between principals and assistant principals captured in the present study, little research exists that explores the topic. What the study does suggest, however, is that school districts must be mindful of the relationship that exists between these two levels of campus leaders. Furthermore, they must carefully evaluate how school administrators are paired, and they must support and nurture the relationship through purposeful team building or coaching. Lastly, when conflict arises between principals and assistant principals, school district leaders must listen and act. Unhealthy pairings should not be allowed to continue, and efforts should be made to find alternate placements, when necessary, for the benefit of the individual school administrators and the campus itself.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked the following: What systems of support do K-12 school administrators in the study district perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities?

Participants were emphatic about the systems of support that would best assist them. First, and resoundingly, school administrators wanted targeted support focused on understanding budgeting, school finance, and funding sources. This finding was interesting in that this type of support was requested by both assistant principals and principals alike. While assistant principals indicated that they rarely ever saw budget-related items, principals indicated that upon ascending to the role, they had no prior experience in how to manage budgets and often relied on their secretaries to learn about the work. School finance is complex, and federal, state, and local funding sources have very specific guidelines that must be followed, so it is no surprise that school administrators, who are tasked with building budgets and spending funds appropriately, feel grossly unprepared to carry out this function and are requesting support to do so.

Participants were equally emphatic about the school district offering opportunities for them to network and collaborate with their peers. They stated that having the opportunity to connect with peers would provide multiple benefits, including having someone to share ideas with, to normalize the experiences they encounter, to problem solve when challenges arise, and to combat the isolation inherent to their roles. Swann et al. (2021) asserted that when adults participate in collaborative social environments, they are better able to acquire, share, and apply knowledge. Such practices also lead to the development of individuals, which in turn, improves the organization as whole. Gimbel and Kefor (2018) found that school administrators overwhelmingly report a need for collaboration, discussion, and reflection to help buffer

challenges and enhance the likelihood of remaining in the profession. The findings of this study align with these studies.

Additional systems of support that school administrators resoundingly requested were mentorship and coaching. Participants indicated that they needed mentors to help them acquire skill in operational matters. For instance, Participants AP4F, AP1C, and P1F discussed how a mentor would have been beneficial as they navigated the logistical challenges of running a campus. Participants also stressed that they needed coaching to enhance leadership skills. Participant P3C stated that having a coach to help her through her leadership journey would be helpful, while Participants P1C and P3C talked about how beneficial it was to have the principal supervisor as a coach. One participant, SA1F, discussed how she was in such need of a coach that she was actively looking to contract one independently since such support was not offered by her school district.

Past research is in alignment with what the participants of this study stated. For instance, Gimbel and Kefor (2018) asserted that mentorships enhance self-efficacy while Hildreth et al. (2018) found that they allow mentees to acquire practical skills. It is important to note that Fernandez et al. (2015) stated that having a mentor is a driver of career advancement, especially among Latino and minority school administrators. This is interesting for two reasons. The first is that 93% of the study participants were Latino or a minority. The second is that a lack of career progression was a theme extracted from this study. Thus, providing mentorship opportunities may help address multiple factors driving attrition and job satisfaction. Regarding leadership coaching, Lochmiller (2018) posited that having a coach lead to advances in school reform, provided school administrators tools that augmented their leadership practices, and enhanced a campus leader's ability to navigate resistance, all of which result in academic success for

students. Therefore, the findings of this study, as revealed by participants, and past research support the need for mentorship and coaching programs for school administrators.

Lastly, school administrators who participated in this study requested support on how to address the social emotional needs of their staff and students. It is interesting to note that the COVID-19 pandemic really brought this gap in training to the forefront. Many of the participants discussed how the pandemic posed challenges that they had not faced in the past and how the collective trauma that resulted from it highlighted their lack of capacity to handle and meet the social emotional needs of students and staff. As Participant P1C stated, school administrators are trained to handle discipline concerns, operational and logistical needs, and staffing issues, but they were not prepared for the level of social, emotional, and mental counseling that they were forced to do with their staff. Multiple participants, including Participants P2C, AP1C, AP2C, AP3C, P2F, and SA3C, also discussed how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic took a social and emotional toll on students. They discussed seeing extreme behaviors that they had not encountered in the past, social regression, high levels of stress and anxiety, increased substance abuse, apathy, and even competing with the job market as students opted to work to support their families rather than continue their education. They overwhelmingly stated that they need help to build capacity on how to address these concerns.

Reid (2021) asserted that the role of a school administrator is evolving as there is an increasing emphasis on mental and emotional health issues. This poses a challenge because current educational leadership preparation programs do not focus on ways to meet such needs. Thus, it is imperative that school districts respond to meet that need by providing focused support on how to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs that arise on a campus.

What these findings suggest is that school districts seeking to retain top talent and mitigate attrition should be purposeful in providing the aforementioned high-leverage systems of support for their campus leaders, which include building support around budgeting and school finance, offering opportunities for networking and collaboration, establishing mentorship and coaching programs to develop managerial and leadership capacity, and providing focused training on how to address the social emotional needs of students and staff.

Recommendations for Practice

Several high-leverage practices that school districts can implement to support and retain school administrators can be gleaned from this study. Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- The workload that school administrators face is overwhelming and unsustainable. To help alleviate this challenge, district leaders should carefully assess the scope of the work, develop ways to streamline or more equitably distribute the work, and evaluate current initiatives to determine whether they are making a positive impact or adding strain to overworked campus leaders. It also advised that district leaders promote and model healthy work/life balance by creating policies that encourage taking time off when needed.
- The current salary structure for school administrators is resulting in loss of income when individuals ascend to campus leadership roles. While funding is an ever-present challenge in public education, district leaders should reevaluate the current method of calculating compensation to ensure that aspiring school administrators are not impacted by pay cuts when they assume a campus leadership role.
- School administrators report that they feel isolated and are resoundingly asking for

- opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. To address this, district leaders should provide a platform and opportunities for school administrators to network and connect with their peers.
- School administrators need clear pathways to career progression and advancement. Therefore, district leaders should strive for transparency and consistency in their hiring practices. Furthermore, they should invest time and effort into creating clearly defined career pipelines that explicitly outline expectations.
 - The relationship between a principal and assistant principal has a direct impact on many aspects of the campus leadership experience. Hence, district leaders should carefully evaluate how school administrators are paired, set systems in place to nurture such relationships, and they must listen and respond when conflict becomes unhealthy for one or both individuals.
 - School finance and budgets are complex, and school administrators are explicitly requesting support in this area. District leaders should tap into staff members with deep knowledge in these areas and offer opportunities for learning to both principals and assistant principals.
 - Having a mentor and coach is important to school administrators, and the benefits of having both are supported by past research and this present study. Thus, district leaders should strive to develop mentoring partnerships and coaching opportunities for both principals and assistant principals. Such opportunities should be implemented with fidelity.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on the field of education. Its impact has been felt by campus leaders, staff, and students. To close the gap in

training that exists for addressing social, emotional, and mental health needs, district leaders should provide professional development opportunities and offer practical strategies to facilitate the challenges school administrators face in these areas.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The findings of this qualitative descriptive study suggest some areas for future research. First, the relationship between a principal and assistant principal has an enormous impact on the experience that school administrators have within the scope of the role. Half of the former school administrators cited this relationship as a primary reason for leaving, while four other administrators indicated that this relationship was a major hindrance to their work. Equally important, every single assistant principal who took part in the study noted that the nature of the relationship with their principal dictated the level of autonomy they were allowed to have on a campus. Yet, research regarding the relationship that exists between a principal and assistant principal is scarce. Thus, this is an area that would benefit from additional exploration. Such research could include gauging how each level of administrator perceives the relationship, whether conflict exists, how conflict is addressed, and how the relationship affects job satisfaction.

Second, this study only focused on the perspectives of current and former school administrators at Study Independent School District. This school district is located in a major metropolitan area, yet its vast geographic footprint includes campuses in areas that are both urban and rural. As was described by participants of this study, the school district is a hub for the community and one of the primary employers in the area. Many of those employees are what multiple participants described as homegrown. They have deep familial connections to the school district, and many graduated from that educational system. In that regard, it has a distinct

culture that mirrors that of a small or rural community. That may limit the generalizability of the study. Therefore, future research could look to replicate this study in both a large, urban school district and a small, rural school district to determine if similar results support this study's findings. Data provided by such research may not only result in further insight, but it may also lead to more generalizable findings.

The findings of this study also highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants repeatedly stressed how the pandemic changed the face of education, their roles, their staff, and their students. They recounted how work became more challenging as they pivoted to virtual education, as they revamped processes to keep schools sanitized, as they navigated a highly charged political climate, and as the trauma resulting from the pandemic affected their students and staff socially, emotionally, and mentally. Many stated that students did not come back to school the same and indicated that they continue to see the effects of the collective trauma experienced during the pandemic. Because the COVID-19 pandemic has only recently become endemic, there may not be as much research surrounding how it ultimately impacted school administrators and how it has changed their roles in perpetuity. Therefore, this is an area primed for future studies.

The findings of this study lend themselves to additional areas of potential future research. For instance, the data indicated that many school administrators felt that there was a pervasive sense of outsiders versus insiders. Thus, future studies may explore ways to assist those perceived as outsiders, if mentorships mitigate this cultural phenomenon, how an outsider's readiness for leadership intersects with this element of the organization's culture, and the factors that contribute to belonging, as aligned with belongingness theory. Furthermore, the findings of this study, and specifically how the role of an administrator impacts their emotional and physical

wellbeing, open the door to exploring how school administrators bring their whole self to the role, the ways in which individuals under excessive stress manifest mental and physical health issues, and of the financial toll associated with such health-related issues. Lastly, the data surrounding the financial impact of school administrator attrition may serve as a segue for exploring the cost associated with mentoring and developing current school administrators as compared to training new ones.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences were reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why attrition was happening, and whether current levels of support were accelerating their departure. The data gathered from participants suggests that attrition is a complex and multifaceted challenge. However, the study also found that there are specific supports that school districts can implement and provide to alleviate the challenges inherent to the role of a school administrator, to facilitate the work that they carry out on a daily basis, and to mitigate attrition. By carefully examining the results of this study, analyzing the themes revealed, and adhering to the recommendations for practice, school districts may be better able to retain top talent and ultimately enhance student achievement.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Current School Administrators

Before the Interview: Hello. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Karina Gonzalez, and I am a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. It is my hope that the results of this study can lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

This interview should take about 45 minutes. Please remember that the interview is being audio recorded for transcription and analysis. I will also be taking notes throughout the interview.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times, and your identity will remain anonymous.

Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can decide to stop at any time. All of your rights and protections as a participant are outlined in the informed consent form, which you have been provided and signed. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. What is your role at Study ISD, and for how long have you served in that role?
2. What do you appreciate most about being a school administrator?
3. What are some factors that enhance your ability to function effectively within your role?

[RQ1, competence]

4. What are some factors that hinder your ability to function effectively within your role?

[RQ2, competence]

5. What are some of the factors that you feel contribute to attrition within the profession?
[RQ3, autonomy]
6. What systems of support, if any, does your school district currently provide to help you undertake your role and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
7. What systems of support, if in place, could better assist you as you undertake your role and responsibilities as a school administrator? [RQ4, relatedness]
8. To what extent do you feel you have autonomy to make decisions that impact your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]
9. What tasks and responsibilities do you feel that you have mastered? [RQ1, competence]
10. What role has your school district played in facilitating or hindering mastery of these tasks and responsibilities? [RQ4, competence]
11. Do you feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within your school district? [RQ1, RQ2, relatedness]
12. What has contributed to your sense of belonging or lack thereof? [RQ4, relatedness]
13. How would you describe your level of exhaustion or burnout? [RQ3, autonomy]
14. How did the response to the pandemic factor into your feelings of exhaustion or burnout?
[RQ3, autonomy]
15. How would you describe your overall level of job satisfaction? [RQ3, autonomy]
16. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Closing the interview: As we conclude, I just want to remind you that your responses will remain confidential. If you have questions at any time, you can reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Thank you for speaking with me today.

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Former School Administrators

Before the Interview:

Hello. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Karina Gonzalez, and I am a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. It is my hope that the results of this study can lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

This interview should take about 45 minutes. Please remember that the interview is being audio recorded for transcription and analysis. I will also be taking notes throughout the interview.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times, and your identity will remain anonymous.

Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can decide to stop at any time. All of your rights and protections as a participant are outlined in the informed consent form, which you have been provided and signed. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. What was your role at Study ISD, and for how long did you serve in that role?
2. Thinking back on your time at Study ISD, what did you appreciate most about being a school administrator?
3. What are some factors that enhanced your ability to function effectively within your role?

[RQ1, competence]

4. What are some factors that hindered your ability to function effectively within your role?
[RQ2, competence]
5. What are some of the factors that you feel contribute to attrition within the profession?
[RQ3, autonomy]
6. What systems of support, if any, did your school district provide to help you undertake your roles and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
7. What systems of support, if in place, could have better assisted you in undertaking your roles and responsibilities as a school administrator? [RQ4, relatedness]
8. To what extent did you feel that you had autonomy to make decisions that impacted your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]
9. What tasks and responsibilities did you feel that you had mastered? [RQ1, competence]
10. What role did Study ISD play in facilitating or hindering mastery of these tasks and responsibilities? [RQ4, competence]
11. Did you feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within your school district? [RQ1, RQ2, relatedness]
12. What contributed to your sense of belonging or lack thereof? [RQ4, relatedness]
13. How would you describe your level of exhaustion or burnout at the time that you left the school district? [RQ3, autonomy]
14. How did the response to the pandemic factor into your feelings of exhaustion or burnout?
[RQ3, autonomy]
15. How would you describe your overall level of job satisfaction at the time that you left the school district? [RQ3, autonomy]
16. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Closing the interview:

As we conclude, I just want to remind you that your responses will remain confidential. If you have questions at any time, you can reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx. Thank you for speaking with me today.

Appendix C: Questions for the Focus Group

1. What are the things that you all appreciate most about being school administrators?
2. What are some of the challenges that you all face as school administrators? [RQ1, competency]
3. What are some systems of support, people, or things that help mitigate those challenges or that help you better meet the demands of your roles and responsibilities? [RQ1, RQ4, relatedness]
4. According to some recent research findings, attrition rates among school administrators hover at about 25%. From your perspective, what are some reasons that this is occurring? [RQ3, autonomy]
5. How much autonomy do you have when it comes to making decisions that impact your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]
6. Which functions or areas of your work do you feel you may need additional support in to build competency? [RQ4, competency]
7. How is connectedness or belonging fostered or hindered within your organization? [RQ1, RQ2, RQ4, relatedness]
8. How would you describe the level of job satisfaction among school administrators? [RQ3, autonomy]
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix D: Edits and Recommendations by the Expert Panel

Interview Questions for Current School Administrators

1. What is your role at Study ISD, and for how long have you served in that role?
2. What are some of the joys or benefits that you appreciate most about being a school administrator?
3. What are some factors that enhance your ability to function effectively within your role?
[RQ1, competence]
4. What are some factors that hinder your ability to function effectively within your role?
[RQ2, competence]
5. What are some of the factors that you feel contribute to attrition within the profession?
[RQ3, autonomy]
6. What systems of support does your school district currently provide to help you undertake your roles and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
7. What additional systems of support could your school district provide to better assist you as you undertake your roles and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
8. To what extent do you feel you have autonomy to make decisions that impact your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]
9. What tasks and responsibilities do you feel that you have mastered? [RQ1, competence]
10. How has your school district facilitated or hindered mastery of these tasks and responsibilities? [RQ4, competence]
11. Do you feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within your school district? [RQ1, RQ2, relatedness]

12. How has your school district facilitated or hindered a sense of belonging? [RQ4, relatedness]
13. How would you describe your level of exhaustion or burnout? [RQ3, autonomy]
14. How did the response to the pandemic factor into your feelings of exhaustion or burnout? [RQ3, autonomy]
15. How would you describe your level of job satisfaction? [RQ3, autonomy]
16. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Interview Questions for Former School Administrators

1. What was your role at Study ISD, and for how long did you serve in that role?
2. Thinking back on your time at Study ISD, what are some of the joys or benefits that you appreciated most about being a school administrator?
3. What are some factors that enhanced your ability to function effectively within your role? [RQ1, competence]
4. What are some factors that hindered your ability to function effectively within your role? [RQ2, competence]
5. What are some of the factors that you feel contribute to attrition within the profession? [RQ3, autonomy]
6. What systems of support did your school district provide to help you undertake your roles and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
7. What systems of support could your school district have provided to better assist you undertake your roles and responsibilities? [RQ4, relatedness]
8. To what extent did you feel that you had autonomy to make decisions that impacted your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]

9. What tasks and responsibilities did you feel that you had mastered? [RQ1, competence]
10. How did your school district facilitate or hinder mastery of these tasks and responsibilities? [RQ4, competence]
11. Did you feel a sense of connectedness or belonging within your school district? [RQ1, RQ2, relatedness]
12. How did your school district facilitate or hinder a sense of belonging? [RQ4, relatedness]
13. How would you describe your level of exhaustion or burnout at the time that you left the school district? [RQ3, autonomy]
14. How did the response to the pandemic factor into your feelings of exhaustion or burnout? [RQ3, autonomy]
15. How would you describe your level of job satisfaction at the time that you left the school district? [RQ3, autonomy]
16. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Questions for the Focus Group

1. What are the things that you all appreciate most about being school administrators?
2. What are some of the challenges that you all face as school administrators? [RQ1, competency]
3. What are some systems of support, people, or things that help mitigate those challenges or that help you better meet the demands of your roles and responsibilities? [RQ1, RQ4, relatedness]
4. According to some recent research findings, attrition rates among school administrators hover at about 25%. From your perspective, what are some reasons that this is occurring? [RQ3, autonomy]

5. How much autonomy do you have when it comes to making decisions that impact your campus, students, and staff? [RQ1, RQ2, autonomy]
6. Which functions or areas of your work do you feel you may need additional support in to build competency? [RQ4, competency]
7. How is connectedness or belonging fostered or hindered within your organization? [RQ1, RQ2, RQ4, relatedness]
8. How would you describe the level of job satisfaction among school administrators? [RQ3, autonomy]
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Notes on feedback, edits, and modifications:

The Expert Panel members included a current elementary school principal with 16 years of experience in campus leadership, a central office administrator with a doctorate in education who also serves as an adjunct professor at a local university, and a leadership consultant who oversees the alternative principal certification program at an Education Service Center in Texas. The following feedback was provided collectively by the group regarding the interview questions:

- Questions 1, 3, 4, 9, 14, 16 – no changes, edits or modifications suggested; keep as is
- Question 2 – modify wording to state “what do you appreciate most about being a school administrator?”
- Question 5 – Consider adding, “What do you think is the average amount of years an administrator remains in their position? What factors do you think play a role in whether they leave or stay? Do you see yourself in the profession within the next 5 years? Why or why not?”
- Question 6 – I would ask this after I find out about the systems of support. I was noticing

that the research questions are objective, however, the interview questions are asked in a way to lead them to think about the district's role in providing support. So, I would leave it open in the interview questions as well. Consider rewording this to "What, if any, systems of support would you say contribute to your ability to function effectively within your role?"

- Question 7 – Consider rewording to say, "What systems of support, if in place, could better assist you as you undertake your role and responsibilities as a school administrator?"
- Question 8 – Consider making this a scaled question. With 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 meaning strongly agree, what is your level of agreement with this statement: I have autonomy to make decisions that impact my campus. What caused you to respond this way?
- Question 10 – Consider changing to "what role has your school district played in supporting you and your ability to function effectively as a campus leader?"
- Question 11 – Since this is a closed ended question, add "What makes you feel this way" to elicit more response.
- Question 12 – Consider changing to "What has contributed to your sense of belonging or lack thereof?"
- Question 13 – This question assumes they are burned out or exhausted. Consider changing to separate questions: Have you ever experienced burnout within this role? If so, what contributed to this? How would you describe your level of exhaustion and the impact it had on your effectiveness? How did you overcome this feeling? Looking back what could have been in place to prevent you from this experience? What, if anything,

could have been done to best support you during this time?

- Question 15 – Add “overall”

No recommendations regarding changes, edits, or modifications were suggested for the focus group; advised to leave as is.

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form Abilene Christian University

Title of Project: Perceptions of School Administrators on the Role of Support Systems in Attrition Among Principals and Assistant Principals

Principal Investigator: Karina N. Gonzalez, doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University

Introduction:

This study seeks to explore attrition among school administrators and the factors that mitigate or facilitate turnover. The purpose of the study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. A primary goal is that the results of this study will lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts address retention and academic achievement.

Approximately 20 participants will be chosen to participate in this study. Specifically, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of school administrators who currently work at [redacted] School District or who worked within the school district at some point in their career. In order to participate, the following criteria must be met: participants must currently serve or have served as a principal or assistant principal at any of the K-12 campuses within [redacted] School District. Participants will take part in either an interview or focus group, each of which is expected to take approximately one hour.

You may be able to take part in this research study. This form provides important information about the study, including the risks and benefits to you as a potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask the researcher any questions that you may have about the study. You can ask about research activities and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as a family member.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Purpose, Procedures, and Duration:

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. This research is also important because it may lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

If selected for participation, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures: one interview or one focus group session. If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last approximately one hour, in addition to any travel time necessary to take part in the interview or focus group. With your consent, the interview and focus group will be audio recorded. Video recording may also occur.

Risks and Benefits:

There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur: breach of confidentiality. This risk is considered serious but not likely to occur.

The interviews that will be conducted are of minimal risks. The identification of participants will not be revealed. A pseudonym or participant number will be used in lieu of names. If there is a breach of confidentiality due to audio or video recording, it is considered serious, but such circumstances are rare and not likely to occur.

Participation in the focus group is also of minimal risk. The identification of participants will not be revealed. A pseudonym or participant number will be used in lieu of names. However, there is a risk that answers and identities may be linked by other focus group participants. Thus, while confidentiality of responses will be of primary importance, the participants in the focus group may be able to identify the responses of other participants in the group. If there is a breach of confidentiality due to audio or video recording or linked identities, it is considered serious, but such circumstances are rare and not likely to occur.

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include: 1) expressing your views and perceptions regarding attrition among school administrators and the impact of support on turnover rates, 2) reflecting on the factors that have enhanced or hindered your ability to carry out the functions of your role, and 3) providing insight that may lead to meaningful recommendations that benefit school administrators.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

Any information that you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. However, it is possible that other people may become aware of your participation in this study, and this is especially applicable for those individuals participating in the focus group. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be protected by taking the following steps:

Participant identity will be protected by using pseudonyms or participant numbers so that names are confidential. In addition to the data being confidential and using pseudonyms or participants numbers, the researcher will be the only one with access to the data. The interviews and observations that are collected as data sources will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. Participant consent forms will be stored in the locked filing cabinet as well. Audio or video recordings of interviews and the focus group will be stored in a password protected laptop and downloaded to a Google drive which requires a password to access. Study data will be maintained for the required time of 3 years after completion of the study. In the

event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher is Karina N. Gonzalez, and she may be contacted at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the lead researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact the dissertation chair, Dr. John Harrison, Ph.D., at xxxxx@acu.edu. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Executive Director of Research, Qi Hang, at xxxxxxx@acu.edu.

Additional Information:

This study will explore your perspectives on attrition among school administrators and the impact of support systems. It will also answer four critical research questions, which include the following:

RQ1: What do current and former K-12 school administrators consider to be factors that enhance their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

RQ2: What do current and former K-12 school administrators consider to be factors that hinder their ability to carry out the functions of leading a campus?

RQ3: How do current and former K-12 school administrators describe the factors that contribute to attrition?

RQ4: What systems of support do K-12 school administrators perceive would better assist them as they undertake their roles and responsibilities?

The research questions in this study will drive the conversations that take place in the interviews or focus group that will be conducted with you as a participant.

Consent Signature Section:

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

Signature of Participant: _____

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter

Date: 12-5-2022

IRB #: IRB-2022-102

Title: Perceptions of School Administrators on the Role of Support Systems in Attrition Among Principals and Assistant Principals

Creation Date: 11-7-2022

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Karina Gonzalez

Review Board: ACU IRB

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Letter

Hello. My name is Karina Gonzalez, and I am a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. I am conducting a study on attrition among school administrators and exploring the factors that mitigate or facilitate turnover. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. It is my hope that the results of this study will lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

Approximately 20 participants will be chosen to participate in this study. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the perceptions of school administrators who currently work at [redacted] School District or who worked within the school district at some point in their career. In order to participate, the following criteria must be met: participants must currently serve or have served as a principal or assistant principal at any of the K-12 campuses within [redacted] School District.

Those selected for this study will be asked to participate in either an interview or a focus group, both of which will last approximately one hour. There are no known risks or discomforts for participants who are offering their individual perceptions for this research. Furthermore, participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time.

Prior to participating in this study, you will be provided an Informed Consent Form which will outline the purpose of the study, your rights as a participant, and your right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants may ask questions concerning this research before agreeing to participate or at any point throughout the study. You may also contact me at any time at xxxxxx@acu.edu or (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Do you have any questions that I can answer at this time? Are you interested in participating in this study and providing your perceptions on the subject?

Appendix H: Site Permission to Conduct Study

Hello. My name is Karina Gonzalez, and I am a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership at Abilene Christian University. I am conducting a study on attrition among school administrators and exploring the factors that mitigate or facilitate turnover. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school administrators in order to better understand how their experiences are reflected in the turnover rate of leaders, why it is happening, and whether current levels of support are accelerating their departure. It is my hope that the results of this study will lead to recommendations regarding effective ways to support school administrators based on their unique needs and to help school districts seeking to address retention and academic achievement.

I am writing to request permission to recruit participants from among your current school administrators. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the perceptions of three current principals and three current assistant principals. Those selected for this study will be asked to participate in an interview or focus group, each of which will last approximately one hour. There are no known risks or discomforts for participants who are offering their individual perceptions for this research. Furthermore, participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time.

May I attain your authorization to speak to sitting school administrators within your district? If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxx@acu.edu or (xxx) xxx-xxxx. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Appendix I: Initial Codes

100 things	beat down	changed mindset
100% burnout	behavior of kids	checks and balances
15 teachers left	being fed	chicken without head
2 (low)	being strategic	circle doesn't stop
20th year	best of both worlds	classroom and coaching
23 years	better delegation	clearer job progression
a 12	Bexar Prep	clearly defined responsibility
a joke	big decision	clearly defined role
a lot of autonomy	bigger audience	clueless
accountability	bilingual	coaching
accountability of others	bite my lip	collaboration
actively looking	blew up	collaboration meetings
additional work	blue-bird schools	coming home
administrators talking	boundaries	communication
advocate for child	branded	community culture
all over the place	bravery	community events
allowed to speak	break to recoup	compartmentalized
always being pulled	budget	compassion fatigue
always had support	budgeting	compassionate
always stretched	budgets	compensation
amazing district	build a team	competent enough
amazing teachers/staff	building rapport	complaints
amount of work	building relationship	complete autonomy
And I left	built my own	confidence
anxiety	built trust	conflict
anything else, no	burn out quickly	connect with people
AP first year	burned out	connected
AP group	burnout	connected feeling
APs have no voice	burnout at beginning	consequences for that
asking questions	calling colleagues	consistency
assimilate to culture	camaraderie	constantly moving
astronomical level of work	came naturally	control
at-large board	campus level	conversation
at-risk	can't be anyone	convocation
attempted to implement	can't do it alone	corrupt communication
auditing programs	can't do this	counseling role
bad mouthing performance	can't go into classrooms	count with one hand
balance	can't say mastery	COVID
banning books	capacity to listen	create own support
battle	central office staff helped	create programs
be different person	change I want to see	create things
be more PC	change in leadership	created more work

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

credentials or experience	disciplining students	executive coaching
criticism was hard	discrete time periods	exhausted
cruise control	disheartening	exhausting
culture	disrespectful	exhaustion
curriculum	district has hindered	exhaustion is real
curriculum office	district is a hub	expect a lot
cyclical connections	district mandates	experiences into account
data desegregation	doesn't feel right	exposure
day to day	doesn't support feedback	fails then pivot
dealing with people	doesn't support pushback	faith
debacle	doesn't support thinking	fake game
decision power	domino effect	familial
decisions made at district	don't do that again	families
dedication	don't explore potential	family
defined job progression	don't know	family members
definitely a game	don't know anything else	family oriented
delegate	don't know difference	fear
demands from society	don't want to belong	feedback
demands gone up	don't want to leave	feel good about
demeanor, outlook changed	done when convenient	feeling underappreciated
dependable	double duty	felt like Cinderella
depended on principal	double-edged sword	felt very supported
depends	drama	fiasco
depends on campus	dynamic with principal	fidelity
depends on leadership	efficiency	fight
depends on team	electoral process	fight back
deserved an interview	embarrassing	figure it out
deserved an opportunity	emotional exhaustion	figure things out
develop leadership skills	emotionally exhausting	fill my bucket
devoted my career	empathetic	finding vapes
didn't allow me	encounter new issues	first phone call
didn't get to be principal	end of that	fit comfortably
didn't have any	enjoyed the challenge	flavor of the month
getting into	enjoyed the change	focus on kids
didn't make sense	entire school district	followed leadership
difference of view	equity	for the students
different job every day	escalated	forward thinking
different meetings	ethically	friction
different philosophy	even workload	friends
difficulty	everybody was tense	friends with principal
director of schools	everyone affected	fruits of labor
disappointing	everyone sticks to corner	full-fledged observation

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

generation	Hard	I had autonomy
geographic culture	hard conversations	I had nothing
get to know	hard to leave them	I just cried
give me more	harming them	I know education
give tracks	has potential	I know so and so
given positions	have fun	I like knowledge
glass half full	HB 4545	I made it
goal	hearings	I need help
good combination	heart	I really care
good leadership	heavy burden	I resigned
good old boy	heavy responsibility	I still pushed
good old boys	held down	I was a ghost
good outweigh negative	help children	I was satisfied
good outweighs bad	help families	I was tired
good rapport	help others	I wasn't effective
got a lot left	help out	I'm a learner
gotcha	help students	I'm done
gotta get out	helping teachers	I'm hopeful
government	high burnout	I'm tired
grant	high exhaustion	identifying needs
grateful	high stakes testing	ignorance
great team	highly qualified experts	ignored by HR
greater impact	hindered	impact
groom APs	hiring right people	impact on trajectory
grow leaders	hobbled	impact principals have
grow others	hold record	implement change
growing leadership	Holdsworth	impossible
growing teachers	homegrown culture	improve very top
grows leaders	honor (to serve)	inability to lead
guiding	hours invested	incorporating into community
had some bridges	huge pay cut	information session
had to learn	human resources	instantly do things
halfway home grown	hurdles	instructional leader
hand slapped	I better go	instructional leadership
handbook	I can do it	integrity
handed keys and that's it	I care	interact
handle it	I created process	interaction with kids
hands are tied	I cry	political conversations
hands in the pot	I deserve more	internship
hands on training	I do	invested in community
hands were tied	I give autonomy	irate parents
happens for a reason	I got better	isolated on campus

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

isolating	left on island	military
isolation is real	levels of connectedness	mind for us
it bothered me	liberation	models of great leadership
it never stopped	life in a binder	money
it was rough	light at the end	monkey wrench
it's a calling	lightened the load	monthly trainings
it's you	limited instructional coaching	more balanced
jaded	listening	more time
job is hard	literally 24/7	mostly satisfied
job is tough	little things add up	motivated learner
juggling act	lonely position	move waves and policy
jumping in	long hours (six to six)	much stress
just teach	lost marriage	multi-tasking
justification	love everybody	multiple levels
justify	love it (role as AP)	multiple responsibilities
keep mouth shut	love my children	my family
kids	love my job	my team
kids and families	low to tolerable	National Blue Ribbon
kids are passed	lowest paid admin	need each other
kids have jobs	made a difference	need for balance
kids kept me	made stuff up	needed cleanup
know people	made them up	nepotism
label (of children)	make a difference	network
lack of community	make decisions	network groups
lack of flexibility	managerial	network meetings
lack of leadership	maximization	never any consistency
lack of support	me figuring out	never been admin
larger impact	meaningful impact	never been administrator
latitude	mediator	never ending job
leaders don't know what to do	medication	never enough
Leaders without experience	meeting with departments	never on campus
learn limits	meetings	never saw it
learned at elementary	meetings with leaders	new principal
learned hard way	mental breakdown	no better
learning	mental exhaustion	no clue
learning daily	mentor	no cohorts
learning from environment	mentors	no current campaign
learning from others	mentorship	no get-togethers
learning from presenters	microaggressions	no go-to person
learning role	micromanage	no hands-on experience
learning year	micromanaging	no hard feelings
leave	mile wide, inch deep	no idea if normal

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

no meetings	not role model	outside perspective
no onboarding	not satisfied	outsider
no organizational impact	not talking	overkill
no recognition	not team player	overwhelmed with work
no SEL training	not treating fairly	overwhelming
no substance	not used right	paperwork
no support	not worth it	paranoia
no support mechanism	not worth the pressure	parents
no system	nothing moved	passionate
no training	nothing to teach	path forward
no way to control	nothing was formal	patience
nobody's happy	observe	pay
nobody's pushing for me	obstacle	pay cut
none	offended	pay scale
not as administrator	oil and water	payback
not as much	old chess board	payoff
not being heard	old school	PD doesn't help
not being valued	older staff frustrated	PD would help
not consequential	on a scale of 1-10, 100	penalize
not desired	on my own	people
not dictated	on the fly	people into positions
not easiest job	on the job training	people leave
not easy decision	on their radar	people of color
not fair	one hub	people stay
not for everyone	one person	people that care
not from district	one-on-one meetings	people to call
not getting recognition	only 1,2,3 principals	personal leadership growth
not going back	only admin during pandemic	personal work ethic
not going to make it	only black guy	personality trait
not good leaders	only one year	philosophy
not having tools	only two administrators	physical capacity
not mentor	open door policy	pick up phone
not micromanaged	open minded	pick your battles
not much collaboration	operations	pipeline
not on same page	opportunity	planning
not one-person job	organizational culture	planning tool
not pay enough to go back	organized meetings	play politics
not prepared	organizing	play the game
not present	other assistant principals	PLGs
not put stress	others are doing	policy is policy
not really realizing	out of my control	political blocks
not reflected	outside consulting support	politicized

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

politics	questionable things	run schools effectively
poor planning	quick thinker	running all programs
positive effects	quite a bit	same money
positively impact	quite tired	satisfied
post pandemic place	quota	scare about disappointing
power to change	Raptor	scary
practicum	reach all kids	school board
pre-pandemic basis	reach out	school culture
pressure by state	reach out to people	school declining
pressures by society	readers of people	school reform
pretty satisfied	real belonging	scores plummeting
principal	real issues	scrutinize
principal and director	really hard	second family
principal meetings	really sad	second guess
principal on 24/7	reckoned in future	see disaster
principal oversaw	recognition	see things through
principal supervisor	recruiting talent	seek your own
principal supervisors	refining sympathy	seeking elsewhere
principal supportive	Region 20	sense of belonging
principals lean in	reinvent	sense of community
prioritizing	related to board	series on Facebook
proactive	relational	serious job
probably mastered	relationship not good	serve children
problem of practice	relationship with parents	set parameters
problem solver	relationships	she's knowledgeable
problem solving	relationships not fostered	short handed
problem statements	rely on staff	short staffed
problem still there	remember what we're there	sidestepping directives
process	representation is important	silos
product from system	response is immediate	similar demographics
professional development	responsibility	sleep at school
professional network	responsible for wellness	smooth sailing
program to build leaders	retaliation	so much for one person
programs	revolving door	social media outlets
protect me	rewarding job	sole provide
protection of students	right people	some autonomy
proud	right people in right place	some support
pulled in many directions	right principal	somebody in charge
put a wrench	role has evolved	somebody's ear
put down	root cause statements	something new happens
put right leaders	root of problem	speak the language
putting out fires	rotation program	special ed

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

special place	take challenges head-on	third in five years
spiral	take knowledge	threatened by knowledge
spread quickly	take next step	tight-knit cohort
stability	take step back	tighten culture
staff member	taken advantage of	time away
stagnation	takes toll	time management
start immediately	taking notes	time to invest
start running	taking pay cuts	too many hats
stay because of children	talent management	took pride
stay connected	talk to parents	top of the hill
staying late	talking time	touched dozen areas
still feel burnout	talking to parents	train wreck
stop what I'm doing	talking to people	training not aligned
strategic plan	target effective teachers	training not conducive
streamlining work	taxing	training program
stress	taxing role	trainings
stressful	teacher mentor program	transformed
structured agenda	teachers don't hang out	transition was easy
struggle	teachers feel valued	trauma
struggled to keep up	team	trial by fire
student behaviors regressed	team as support	trickle down
students not socialized	team of people	trouble
studying support	thankless job	trusted decision
stuff I know	that didn't happen	trust
sturdy person by nature	that's enough	trust factor
succeed and attain	that's your baby	trust us
summer school principal	their school	trust your teachers
superintendent	therapy	trusted
support	there's nothing	turn off job
support campuses	they don't care	type of principal
support from colleagues	they don't see	undermining
support from district	they gave shell	understanding
supported	they get credit	unglorified job
surrounding with mastery	they get penalized	uniformity
sustainable systems	they overturn it	unique cultural challenges
swamp fires	they speak	unknown
switching careers	they take advantage	unnecessary positions
systemize what can't be	they trusted me	untapped resources
systems	they're there	using resources
systems and structures	thick skin	value me
systems in place	things evolve	varied roles
take away	things were obvious	very cliquey

Appendix I: Initial Codes (Continued)

very depressing	work is valued
very difficult	work like burro
very dissatisfied	work never done
very exhausting	work, work, work
very hard	worked all day
very little autonomy	working collectively
very low satisfaction	working on problem of practice
very prevalent	working together
very proud	workload
vital skill	wouldn't work again
voice	write up
voice is mute	wrong decision
walk (away)	wrong mindset
wall comes down	yoke
wasn't challenging	you being one
wasn't given chance	you find out
wasn't worth it	you listen
wasted energy	you own it
watched myself	you're born here
watching humans crumble	you're gonna learn
waving flags	you're in it together
we bumped heads	you're not
we compete	your awesome teachers
we get yelled at	zero
we won't grow	
we're in it	
wealth of knowledge	
wearing out	
welcoming kiddos	
well spelled out	
what principals wanted	
where God wants me	
where it ended	
who they wanted	
who you knew	
willing to help	
willingness to learn	
wonderful relationship	
wore several hats	
work around it	
work for the Lord	
work in district	

Appendix J: Secondary Codes

accountability	hiring practices	staffing
advocacy	impact	strategy
attrition	impact of Covid on role	strength of individual
balance	inconsistency	strength of organization
bias	individual strength	struggle to leave role
budget	ineffective support	student needs
burnout	inner conflict	survival
career progression	insecurity	toll on family
challenges of the role	instructional leadership lacks	trauma
challenges of the work	isolation	trust
characteristic needed for role	joys of the work	unclear expectations
coaching	lack of support	unreasonable expectations
collaboration	leadership	unsustainable workload
communication	job satisfaction	work ethic
community culture	mentor	
compassion fatigue	mitigation for attrition	
compensation	mobility	
competence	motivation	
connectedness	nature of the work	
consistency	needed support	
coping skills/mechanisms	nepotism	
counseling background	networking as support	
culture	optimism	
culture - familial	organizational culture	
culture of blame	overwhelming work	
culture of conformity	personal strength	
dedication	politics	
defeated	potential support system	
desperation	pride in work	
disconnect	processes	
district as hindrance	reality vs. expectation	
effective support	reason for attrition	
emotional toll	relationship between P/AP	
ethical practices	relationship with team	
exhaustion	relationships	
expectations	relief after leaving	
feeling unappreciated	retribution	
unseen/unheard/unvalued	sadness	
focus on students	self-learner	
gaps in grad programs	self-reliance	
generational differences	skill needed for role	
helplessness	social emotional learning	

Appendix K: Secondary Codes/Categories and Initial Themes

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes
Career progression	Career progression
Compensation, balance, challenges of the role, isolation, mobility, politics, unreasonable expectations	Challenges of the role
Attrition, COVID, communication, overwhelming work, reason for attrition, unsustainable workload	Challenges of the work
Characteristic needed for the role, counseling background, dedication, focus on student needs, impact, individual strength, personal strength, relationships, self-learner, self-reliance, strength of the individual, work ethic	Characteristics needed for the role
Community culture	Community culture
Coping skills/mechanisms, joy of the work, motivation, optimism, pride in work	Coping skills
Bias, connectedness, culture, familial, culture of blame, culture of conformity, ethical practices, feeling unappreciated, feeling unseen/unheard/unvalued, nepotism, organizational culture, retribution, strength of organization, trust	District culture
Coaching, effective support, mentor, mitigation for attrition	Effective support
Compassion fatigue, competence, defeated, desperation, emotional toll, exhaustion, helplessness, inner conflict, insecurity, job satisfaction, relief after leaving, sadness, struggle to leave role, survival, toll on family, trauma	Emotional Toll
Burnout, exhaustion	Impact of the work
Ineffective support	Ineffective support
Consistency, disconnect between campus and district, district as a hindrance, expectations, hiring practices, inconsistency, lack of support, leadership, processes, unclear expectations	Leadership
Nature of the work	Nature of the work
Relationship between principal and assistant principal, relationship with team	Relationship between principal and assistant principal
Accountability, advocacy	Responsibilities
Skills needed for the role, social emotional learning, strategy	Skills needed for the role
Budget, collaboration, gaps in grad programs, generational differences, instructional leadership lacking, networking as support, potential support system, reality vs. expectation, staffing	Support needed

Appendix L: Additional Sample Responses

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Career progression	Career progression	<p>Participant AP2C: “I don't feel like I've gotten the payback or the recognition that I feel I deserve for the blood, sweat, and tears I've given.”</p> <p>Participant P2F: “And, when I saw these other people getting interviews, like, alright, 14 years as a principal, and they've never been one, and it just, it didn't make any sense to me.”</p> <p>Participant AP2F: “I think the district knew exactly who they wanted, whether that information is coming from a board member... or someone... who has a connection somewhere.”</p> <p>Participant AP2C: “I'm going to work you like a burro, but...you're never going to be the line leader.”</p>	<p>Participant SA3C: “Not all districts, this one included, have that clearly defined progression.”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “It's who you know, and who has somebody's ear... Instead of you getting selected... based on what you've done.”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “What we all just wanted to know, what they had in mind for us.”</p>
Compensation, balance, challenges of the role, isolation, mobility, politics, unreasonable expectations	Challenges of the role	<p>Participant P2C: “We get yelled at, told off.”</p> <p>Participant AP2F: “Doesn't matter what you do, it's going to be wrong... in someone's eyes.”</p> <p>Participant P1F: “I was pretty much on my own.”</p> <p>Participant P3C: “Not being able to see... the fruits of your labor can sometimes lead to frustration as a leader, and then you just are like, well, maybe I need to do something else.”</p> <p>Participant AP3F: I think it was just, you know, all the politics that go with being an administrator.”</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: “Nobody's happy.”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “There's not necessarily another campus that has this specific... problems that you have or situations that you have and so that's hard.”</p> <p>Participant SA3C: “And everybody thinks in silos of their own program, and then they come at us, you know, with, like so many things.”</p> <p>Participant SA2C: “How to, how to play politics.”</p>

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Attrition, COVID, communication, overwhelming work, reason for attrition, unsustainable workload	Challenges of the work	Participant P1F: "I had so many other things that I needed to do." Participant AP4F: "I feel like I was always stretched." Participant P3C: "They're overwhelmed with...the work." Participant P2F: "COVID...took a lot out of a lot of people."	Participant SA2C: "We start the year with 100 things to do, and by the time we get to mid-year...they've added an extra...100 things." Participant SA2C: "Nothing...was taken off my plate."
Characteristic needed for the role, counseling background, dedication, focus on student needs, impact, individual strength, personal strength, relationships, self-learner, self-reliance, strength of the individual, work ethic	Characteristics needed for the role	Participant P1C: "You have to create it [support] yourself." Participant AP2F: "I was able to take the knowledge...learned." Participant AP2C: "So the horrible things that were done to me...and have had to heal from...I then am more compassionate when...dealing with students."	Participant SA1F: "I like the relationships with students and then also with families." Participant SA1F: "A few years ago, we had a really good AP group going." Participant SA1F: "I'm like, looking for outside consulting or support for myself to, to grow in that capacity."
Community culture	Community culture	Participant P1F: "I have that very strong connection with, with the bilingual and ESL population." Participant P3C: "It was just the community coming together." Participant P2C: "I'm starting to see...students that I taught initially...their kids are coming through."	Participant SA3C: "The school in this area is...the largest employer, the largest community center." Participant SA1F: "They brand themselves around...being community." Participant SA3C: "The school district is the hub of the geographic area."
Coping skills/mechanism, joys of the work, motivation, optimism, pride in work	Coping skills	Participant AP3C: "You get the best of both worlds." Participant P2F: "I enjoyed it."	Participant SA2C: "The payoff that we have is what we see with the kids and the families, the growth there, the growth of the teachers."

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Bias, connectedness, culture, familial, culture of blame, culture of conformity, ethical practices, feeling unappreciated, feeling unseen/unheard/unvalued, nepotism, organizational culture, retribution, strength of organization, trust	District culture	<p>Participant AP1C: "I felt that the campus leadership was...bad mouthing my performance without any data."</p> <p>Participant P2F: "It had nothing to do with deserving the position, but I felt like I deserved an interview."</p> <p>Participant AP2C: "I cannot rely on the school or the district to fill my bucket."</p> <p>Participant AP4F: "I always kept my mouth shut on a lot of the topics out there."</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: "I too say what I'm thinking, and I know for a fact that...had an impact on my trajectory."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "If you didn't assimilate to the culture of the district...then, you weren't going to make it."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "Ethically that shouldn't happen."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "They're all friends, and good old boys...even though they're not all men."</p>
Coaching, effective support, mentor, mitigation for attrition	Effective support	<p>Participant P2F: "The support was more just picking up the phone and calling a colleague."</p> <p>Participant P2C: "She does check-ins, but also she's there just anytime I need the support or have a question."</p> <p>Participant P3C: "I think self-care in these roles are super important. If you don't have that balance, it's really difficult to last...years in the profession."</p>	<p>Participant SA2C: "Making sure that the people that are teaching the leadership have actually served in that position."</p> <p>Participant SA3C: "There are four or five different hands in the pot, and they're not talking to one another."</p>
Compassion fatigue, competence, defeated, desperation, emotional toll, exhaustion, helplessness, inner conflict, insecurity, job satisfaction, relief after leaving, sadness, struggle to leave role, survival, toll on family, trauma	Emotional toll	<p>Participant AP1F: "I just cried."</p> <p>Participant AP4F: "I'm just tired. I'm just burnt out, and, and I left. I resigned."</p> <p>Participant AP2C: "That woman has not been dead 24 hours, and you're, you're posting her job? Like, how disrespectful is that?"</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: "I almost felt like Cinderella sometimes."</p> <p>Participant SA3C: "At the AP level, I would say low to tolerable [job satisfaction]."</p> <p>Participant SA2C: "We're the ones...get beat down throughout the school year, and it doesn't stop."</p>

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Burnout, exhaustion	Impact of the work	<p>Participant AP3F: "It's 100% burnout...that's really the biggest thing that made me leave."</p> <p>Participant AP1C: "There are some days, like today, where I felt a little beat down...because the nature of the work that we do can be very taxing."</p> <p>Participant P1C: "Especially our new baby principals...They're not going to make it because they're just wearing out. Most of them are on medication. Most of them are seeing a therapist."</p> <p>Participant AP2C: "I'm tired."</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: "They're ready to leave, because they're exhausted."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "And it's the best thing that I ever did, not being in this administrative role anymore."</p>
Ineffective support	Ineffective support	<p>Participant AP2F: "Again, meetings...was there really a point to it? No."</p> <p>Participant AP1C: "But, these trainings, it's much more like, hey, we're rolling out a new initiative, and it's just information sessions, not really how to be better in your current role."</p>	<p>Participant SA3C: "Vape pens are just an example of one of those untouched areas where we're still working with tools from five to ten years ago for a solution that has mutated much faster than that."</p>
Consistency, disconnect between campus and district, district as a hindrance, expectations, hiring practices, inconsistency, lack of support, leadership, processes, unclear expectations	Leadership	<p>Participant P3C: "We've had a lot of change in leadership...that's kind of put a wrench in the process of building pipelines and building programs of that nature."</p> <p>Participant AP4F: "I also feel that at the central office... they don't know what it's like to be an assistant principal or an administration."</p> <p>Participant P1C: "There's a lot of relational employees that are given positions."</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: "Not being supported is hard... it creates this...dynamic of...all I have to do is go to central office, and I get my way."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "In that moment, support me, and then take me aside later, and tell me how I could have done it better."</p> <p>Participant SA1F: "They don't want to have opposing ideas."</p>

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Nature of the work	Nature of the work	<p>Participant AP1C: “In previous years, everybody kind of shared the load evenly and we were able to balance each other out that way.”</p> <p>Participant P1F: “Every day you encounter new issues.”</p> <p>Participant AP2C: “Sometimes, it comes down to whether I agree to press charges, and that can affect that child's life for many years, and so it's a very serious job.”</p>	<p>Participant SA2C: “It's a circle that continues, and it doesn't stop.”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “You handle programs, you handle testing, everything. When you have high stakes testing...there's a lot of pressure with that”</p>
Relationship between principal and assistant principal, relationship with team	Relationship between principal and assistant principal	<p>Participant AP3F: “I went straight to HR. I talked to them. We went back and forth or requested a transfer like three times...but all of those requests were denied.”</p> <p>Participant AP4F: “I went through several principals and a couple of them...I wouldn't want to work with them ever again.”</p> <p>Participant AP1C: “She was very much her way or no other way. And, if you didn't agree, then it could lead to retaliation.”</p>	<p>Participant SA3C: “I can safely say that it depends on your campus.”</p> <p>Participant SA2C: “I've worked on a campus where I was told, you don't answer any questions. I will handle everything.”</p> <p>Participant SA3C: “It depends on what type of principal you have”</p>
Accountability, advocacy	Responsibilities	<p>Participant AP3C: “They're expecting the schools to be held accountable for something that we're not allowed to hold others accountable for.”</p> <p>Participant P2F: “The high school's accountability drives the district's accountability...it changes all the time.”</p> <p>Participant P1C: “I always advocate for the child.</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: “What I love most about being an administrator is working with the teachers...and then seeing...the positive effects that it has on student learning”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “The expectations of our role as administrators...for our campuses to perform, for students to show growth and success.”</p>

Secondary Codes	Initial Themes	Sample Responses from Interviews	Sample Response from the Focus Group
Skills needed for the role, social emotional learning, strategy	Skill needed for the role	<p>Participant AP1C: “Things that we're having to address after the fact are definitely weighing on the amount of work that we do and the amount of energy that we're having to spend on non-instructional items.”</p> <p>Participant P1C: “It was watching these humans crumble right in front of me. That was hard.”</p>	<p>Participant SA3C: “I would say post pandemic, the demands have gone up significantly in some areas, particularly social emotional needs and discipline.”</p> <p>Participant SA1F: “Like, identifying the needs of the campus. So, how do I do that? Then, once I've identified it, how do I strategically plan for impacting the campus?”</p>
Budget, collaboration, gaps in grad programs, generational differences, instructional leadership lacking, networking as support, potential support system, reality vs. expectation, staffing	Support needed	<p>Participant AP2C: “Simple things like time management or budget, you know, the basics of budget, because when you're getting your admin cert, they do very little on budget, and budget changes all the time.”</p> <p>Participant AP1C: “It feels like we're short staffed, and the additional body would always be great to help share the workload.</p> <p>Participant AP3F: “A round table where we talked about issues...from a principal perspective, from an AP perspective, and what we can do to build ourselves as leaders.”</p>	<p>Participant SA1F: “And then, lastly, budget. So, now, how do I budget to execute this plan?”</p> <p>Participant SA2C: “To actually grow, you end up sharing with your... friend group on how to do things more efficient, because we don't have time, but we need to figure out how to do quicker and better for us because we're the ones in it.”</p>