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by

Rhonda J. McWilliams

May 2012

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLES AND CHALLENGES
OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
IN A DIVERSE MID-SIZE SCHOOL DISTRICT IN TEXAS

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

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education
in Professional Leadership

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For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 1769 King James Version

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLES AND CHALLENGES
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An Abstract
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Abstract

Other than the superintendent and the district's athletic director, there is no position more visible than the high school principal. Although there is a significant amount of research and information regarding the roles and challenges of principals collectively, there is not as much specific to high school principals. With the role of the high school principal including increased expectations to adhere to all federal, state, and local mandates and requirements, while providing a quality instructional program where student learning occurs daily in a safe and secure environment, a study that focuses specifically on perceptions of high school principals is warranted. As schools face challenges involving urban issues, migrant students, divisions based on race/ethnicity and class, homelessness, drugs, violence, and more, this study will be an important first step in focusing specifically on the perceptions of the roles and challenges of high school principals.

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. This study was developed as one of qualitative design, exploratory in nature. Qualitative research was used in order to gain a more holistic impression of the perceptions of high school principals of their roles and challenges. The study addresses these questions:

1. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding their roles as the school

- principal, and how do these perceptions align with what they actually do daily?
2. What do high school principals perceive are their greatest challenges?
 3. What do current high school principals recommend as professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals?

For this study, 13 high school principals from a mid-sized school district in Texas participated in an in-depth interview process. Those interviews were transcribed and responses were organized and aligned to the research questions. An analysis was then conducted to determine themes emerging from the interviews with high school principals. Results of the analysis were summarized and conclusions drawn. The study concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for further study.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Student achievement is strongly affected by the leadership of the school principal. Cotton (2003) determined that the manner in which the principal governs the school, builds a strong school climate, and organizes and monitors the school's instructional program are important predictors of academic achievement.

To build a coherent and aligned system of principal effectiveness, the role of the principal must be clearly articulated and expectations set accordingly. Managing principal effectiveness begins with an assessment of the principal's role as a leader and then carefully identifying the characteristics and behaviors viewed as necessary to drive success. The spectrum of responsibilities placed on principals varies from campus to campus and district to district.

Instructional leadership involves many critical activities, including implementing curricular changes, modeling effective teaching, mentoring teachers, and providing critical feedback and evaluations that will lead to improvement. The emphasis on instructional leadership is so important that Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen provided this definition in 2007 of the role of the principal: "The primary role of the principal is to align all aspects of schooling to support the goal of improving instruction so that all children are successful." The second area of focus for the principal is defined by Morgan and Kessler (2007) as "organizational leadership." The concept of organizational leadership includes the principal's ability to align, collaborate, and motivate all teachers and staff and to provide leadership through budget cycles, decisions about resource allocation, and change management initiatives. The third area of focus is

public leadership that will lead to school success. This area involves the principal's role with outside stakeholders, including families, taxpayers, and the community.

Problem Statement

Although there is a significant amount of research and information regarding the roles and challenges of principals, there has not been as much work done specific to the high school principal. White-Smith and White (2009) identified the role of the high school principal as extremely visible and demanding. High school principals are expected to adhere to all federal, state, and local mandates and requirements, provide a quality instructional environment where student learning occurs daily, provide safety and security for students and employees, and still meet the 2001 mandates of No Child Left Behind. The challenges facing high school principals also include urban issues, including migrant students, divisions based on race/ethnicity and class, homelessness, drugs, and violence.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals in a mid-size Texas school district regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. To achieve this, the study was developed as one of exploratory qualitative design.

Principal's visions of reform, according to Sergiovanni (1987), are often subject to strong and competing demands, including parents with their own perceptions of the ideal programs, teachers advocating for a specific curriculum, and district leaders demanding improvement on students' standardized test scores. In 1992, Sergiovanni

proposed that the principal, in addition to addressing stakeholders' demands, remains the point of access to the school. Functioning as school liaison, the principal must provide information regarding the school's overall performance and individual student achievement to parents, district officials, and to the state. The school principal must justify the decisions he/she makes regarding the school's structure and the curriculum. Additionally, the principal must act as a moral model of the type of behavior encouraged within the school.

Clearly, the complexity of the roles of and the challenges for high school principals has increased as stakeholders continue to place enormous requirements and expectations on schools. This study examines high school principals' perceptions of those roles and challenges.

Research Questions

This research project addresses the following questions in this study:

1. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding their role as the school principal, and how do these perceptions align with what they actually do daily?
2. What do high school principals perceive are their greatest challenges?
3. What do current high school principals recommend as professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined within the context of the study:

1. *High school principal.* The leader of a public school which includes students in grades nine through twelve.

2. *Roles of the principal.* The spectrum of responsibilities placed upon a principal in order to lead and manage the school.
3. *Challenges of the principal.* Responsibilities of the principal (i.e. public relations, or handling student discipline) or barriers to success for the principal (i.e. staffing issues, or lack of resources) which cause concern and a lack of focus on leadership priorities.
4. *Perceptions.* Basic impressions in an individual's mind.

School District Profile

This study focused on the high school principals in Jenville ISD, a mid-size public school district in Texas. The Jenville Independent School District (JISD) began in 1959 when two smaller school districts were merged by election to form JISD. The District began with two schools and a small athletic facility. Currently, with a student enrollment nearing 69,000 students, Jenville ISD is the seventh largest school district in Texas. With 73 campuses, two athletic complexes, two transportation terminals, a three-story administration building, a two-story administrative annex, and seven other facilities, JISD covers 170 square miles in two counties in the greater Houston area.

Additional information regarding Jenville ISD is provided below:

- Jenville ISD is the largest employer in Jenville County. For 2010-11, there were 8,500 full-time employees, 600 part-time employees, and 1,300 substitutes.
- Operating budget for 2010-11 was \$488,405,505, with \$7,009 expenditure per student.

- Starting teacher salary for 2010-11 was \$44,500.
- Starting teacher salary for 2011-12 was \$44,000.
- Jenville ISD opened three new campuses in 2010-11 and one in 2011-12.
- For the 2010-11 school year, Jenville ISD was a Texas Education Agency *recognized* school district.
- The Jenville ISD accountability rating for 2011-12 is *acceptable*.
- Four schools in Jenville ISD are currently rated as *academically unacceptable*.

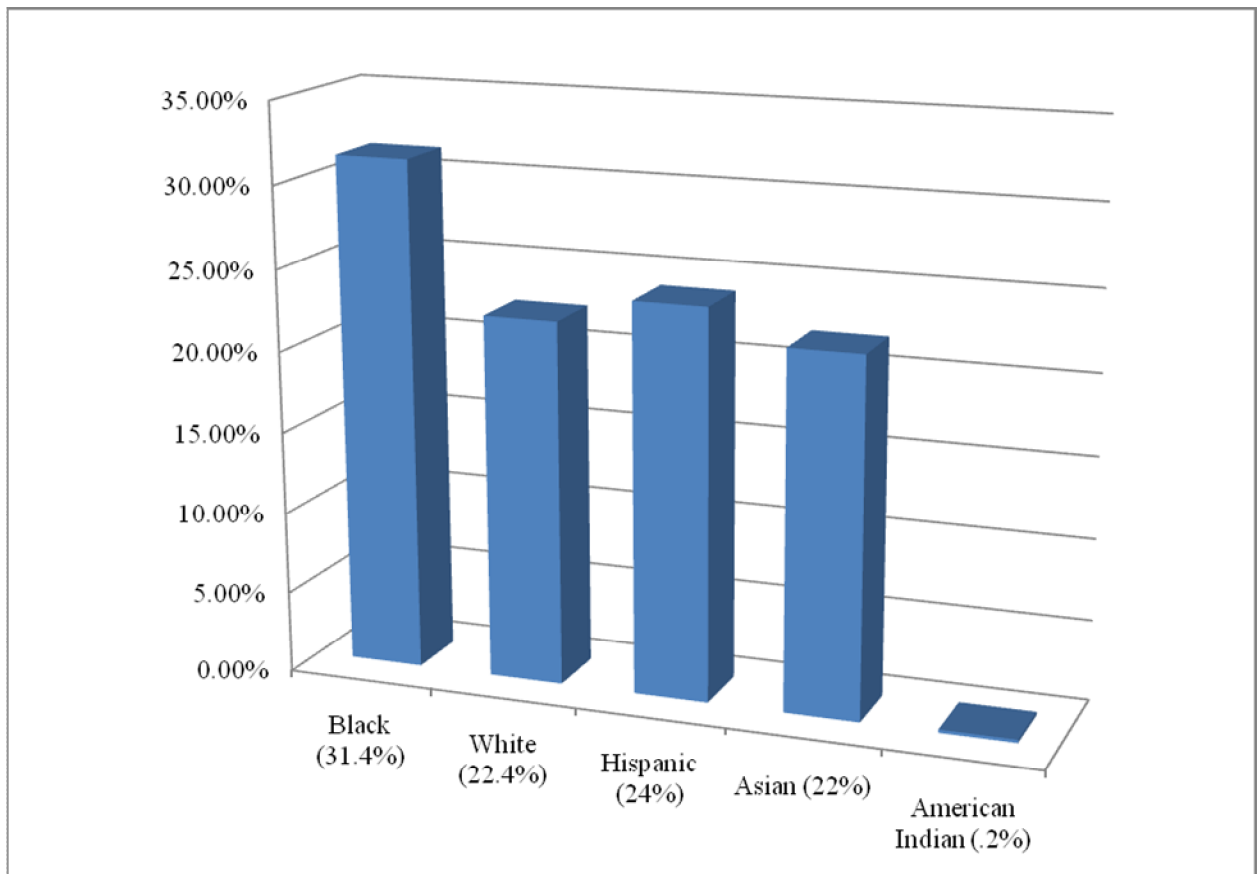
Of these, two are high schools. The table below identifies the requirements for accountability ratings as identified by the Texas Education Agency.

Table 1-1
Accountability Rating Requirements Identified by the Texas Education Agency

Base Indicators	<i>Academically Acceptable</i>	<i>Recognized</i>	<i>Exemplary</i>
TAKS (2010-11)	ELA/Reading/ Writing 70% Social Studies 70% Mathematics 65% Science 60%	Meets 80% standard for each subject	Meets 90% standard for each subject
ELL Progress Indicator (2010-11)	N/A	60% at or above	60% at or above
Completion Rate (Class of 2010)	Meets 75% standard	Meets 85% or 75% and Required Improvement	Meets 95% standard
Annual Dropout Rate (2009-10)	Meets 1.6% standard	Meets 1.6% standard	Meets 1.6% standard
Check for <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> (District)	N/A	A district with an <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> campus cannot be <i>Recognized</i>	A district with an <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> cannot be <i>Exemplary</i>
Check for Underreported Students (District)	N/A	A district that underreports more than 150 students or 3% of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Recognized</i>	A district that underreports more than 150 students or 3% of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Exemplary</i>

- In 2010, five of the 14 Jenville ISD high schools were rated by *Newsweek Magazine* as members of the top high schools in the nation.
- Jenville ISD is one of the most diverse school districts in Texas and in the country. More than 90 dialects and languages are spoken by students and their families who live in JISD. Provided below is a graphic representation of the ethnic breakdown of the district's students in 2010-11.

Table 1-2
2010-11 Ethnicity of Jenville ISD Students



Limitations of the Study

For this study, a cross-sectional survey was used to collect information from a pre-identified set of high school principals. A possible threat to the credibility of the

responses to the survey may have occurred due to the extremely busy schedule of high school principals, creating a reluctance to spend the time necessary to think through survey responses. Another possible limitation of this study was that the identified principals may have been somewhat reluctant to provide genuine responses in regard to their perceptions of their challenges as high school principals in fear of judgment levied upon their responses. Gaining information from respondents only in one school district may also be seen as a limitation of the study.

Summary and Organization of the Study

Chapter One described and outlined the exploratory study surrounding principal leadership and the perceptions of the roles and challenges of high school principals. This chapter contains the problem, purpose, research questions, definitions of terms, limitations of the study, district profile, and summary and organization of chapters.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature regarding the roles of and challenges facing principals. Topics researched provided the researcher with evidence to make connections and draw conclusions about promoting principal leadership and ultimately its effect on student achievement. Topics reviewed in Chapter Two include principal leadership, characteristics of successful principals, and the roles and challenges of principals with emphasis on high school principals.

Chapter Three provides information about the methodology used for the study. The chapter includes information regarding study participants, instrumentation and data collection, ethical considerations, data analysis, and limitations.

Chapter Four contains the results of the study, focusing on the responses provided to the interview questions answered by high school principals. The findings for each

research question are presented within the chapter.

Chapter Five includes conclusions regarding each research question, implications for practice, recommendations for further study, and concluding thoughts from the researcher.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) concluded that leadership has a significant effect on student achievement, second only to the quality of the curriculum and instruction provided by the teacher. This chapter examines the topics of principal leadership, characteristics of successful principals, and the roles and challenges faced by principals.

Principal Leadership

The literature review begins with Sergiovanni (2006) identifying the notion that leadership practice in the principalship is challenging. However, he asserts that there are successful principals, who for every challenge find a reward for them, for their school, and for the students they serve. There are few professions that offer as much satisfaction in return for the amount of dedication and commitment required. In the role of principal, leadership is a personal thing, comprising three important dimensions ó one's heart, head, and hand. The heart of school leadership involves the principal's vision, which is what she/he believes, values, dreams about, and is committed to. The head of leadership has to do with the theories of practice the principal has developed and his/her ability to reflect on those and apply them as situations arise. The hand of school leadership involves the actions the principal takes, the decisions made, and the leadership and management

behaviors applied as his/her strategies become institutionalized in the form of school programs, policies and procedures.

In the last 20 years, there has been much attention focused on the principal's impact on student achievement. Hallinger and Heck (1998) determined that the effects of principal leadership are indirect and difficult to measure. Between 1980 and 1995, Hallinger and Heck reviewed the literature and found that there were different models used to determine the relationship between school leadership and student achievement. First is the direct effect model, which shows that leadership practices used by principals can effect student achievement, separate from other variables. Second, the mediated effect model assumes that school leaders' effect on student achievement is mediated by other organizational and cultural factors. Finally, the reciprocal effect model is based on the assumption that relationships between the school principal and other factors within the school and its environment are interactive. According to Hallinger and Heck (1998), the studies which used indirect effect models showed a greater impact of the principal's leadership on student achievement than the results of studies which used only the direct effect model. Much of the principal's indirect effect comes through shaping the culture of the school (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger (2003). Additionally, leadership that affects the school's culture aligns with Hallinger's (2000) proposal that an effective principal, first of all, defines the mission of the school.

Clark, Martorell, and Rockoff (2009) in a CALDER (Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research) study looking at the effect of school principals on school performance determined three main findings:

1. There was little evidence of any relationship between a school's performance and the principal's educational level or work experience prior to the principalship.
One exception was the positive effect of having served as assistant principal in the same school.
2. There was a positive relationship between experience as a building principal and school performance, especially in the areas of student attendance and math scores.
3. There was mixed evidence regarding the relationship between professional development and principal training programs and school performance.

Upon reviewing the correlates of effective schools first identified in 1982, Lezotte (2011) reiterated the importance of the principal acting as the instructional leader who must effectively communicate the school's mission to students, staff, and parents. As leader of the school, the principal has an obligation to assure that everyone has a shared sense of purpose and a shared understanding of the mission and the core values of the organization. Schools are complex organizations that require strong leadership, and for the school to be effective, the principal must fulfill this role. Although it is possible to have a strong instructional leader in a school that is not yet effective, it is not possible to have an effective school without the principal serving as a strong instructional leader. The effective schools movement, still under the leadership of Dr. Lawrence Lezotte, defines an effective school in the following terms: "The effective school is a school that can, in outcome (performance or results) terms, reflective of its learning for all mission, demonstrate the presence of equity in quality."

Michael Fullan (2003) believed that overcoming the challenges in the role of principal is the moral imperative of school leadership. In his book *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Fullan pointed the way for school leadership by stating:

Leading schools— as in any great organization— requires a principal with the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action. Leading schools through complex reform agendas requires leadership that goes far beyond improving test scores.

Admittedly, developing trust and discipline in an organization that doesn't have it is a huge challenge. But there are cases where it has been done. We need to learn from these schools, focus on the right things, and create the conditions under which new leaders can develop and flourish.

School leaders have been guided by many theories of leadership and by many leadership theorists. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) reviewed several of the prominent theories and theorists that have been influential in guiding school leaders in their book *School Leadership That Works*. The next section of the study examines several leadership theories.

Transformational Leadership. Transformational leadership focuses on change and aims to produce results beyond expectations. Kenneth Leithwood (1994) developed the model for transformational leadership in school leaders. Building on the work of earlier transformational leadership theorists, Leithwood identified the necessary skills for school principals to meet the challenges of the 21st century. First, the principal must provide individual consideration by attending to the needs of staff members. Second, the effective school principal must use intellectual stimulation to get staff members to look at

old problems in new ways. Third, using inspirational motivation, the principal must communicate high expectations for teachers and students. Finally, the principal must use idealized influence through personal accomplishments and by demonstrating character for teachers.

Total Quality Management. W. Edwards Deming (1986) is credited with founding total quality management (TQM). Although created for use in business, TQM principles have had a strong influence on school leaders. Deming defined 14 points that relate to all types of organizations. Those 14 points can be organized into five basic factors that define the actions of the school leader: change agency, teamwork, continuous improvement, trust building, and elimination of short-term goals.

Servant Leadership. First appearing in 1970, servant leadership is attributed to Robert Greenleaf who believed that effective leadership is based upon a desire to help others. Servant leadership has a unique perspective on the position of the organization's leader. Instead of being positioned at the top of the organizational hierarchy, servant leaders are positioned at the center of the organization. This represents the servant leader's need to interact with all aspects and individuals of the organization as opposed to just a few high-level managers. With the focus of servant leadership being on nurturing those within the organization, critical skills of the leader include understanding personal needs of those within the organization, resolving conflict within the organization, being a good steward of the organization's resources, developing the skills of the people in the organization, and being an effective listener.

Situational Leadership. The theory of situational leadership is credited to Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard (2001) and is based upon the leader adapting his/her

behaviors to the maturity level of the followers, based upon their willingness and ability to perform. The theory identifies four leadership styles to correlate with followers' high and low levels of willingness and ability. First, when followers are unable and unwilling, the leader directs their actions with little concern for personal relationships. This is known as high task/low relationship focus, or the "telling" style. Second, when followers are willing but unable, the leader directs their actions in a friendly manner but with concrete direction and guidance. This is referred to as high task/high relationship focus, or the "participating" style. Third, when followers are able but not willing to perform, the leader provides little direction but must persuade them to engage in their tasks. This is the low task/low relationship focus, or the "selling" style. Finally, when followers are willing and able to perform, the leader leaves the work to them, trusting the followers to accomplish their work on their own. This is the low task/high relationship focus, or the "delegating" style.

Instructional Leadership. Although not well defined, instructional leadership is one of the most frequently mentioned educational leadership concepts in North America. Smith and Andrews (1989) identified four roles of the instructional leader: resource provider, instructional resource, communicator, and visible presence. In the role of resource provider, the principal assures that teachers have the facilities, materials, and budget needed to adequately perform their duties. The principal as an instructional resource actively supports the day-to-day instructional activities and programs by modeling desired behaviors, participating in professional development activities, and consistently focusing on instructional concerns. In the role of communicator, the principal sets and articulates clear goals for the school. Finally, as a visible presence, the

principal is engaged in frequent classroom observations and remains highly accessible to all faculty and staff.

Other characteristics of instructional leadership include encouraging and facilitating the study of teaching and learning, facilitating collaboration among teachers, developing coaching relationships among teachers, using instructional research for decision-making, and applying adult learning principles with teachers (Blase and Blase, 1999). In 1995, Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon identified the characteristics of instructional leadership as providing direct assistance to teachers in their daily activities, developing collaborative groups among the staff, providing effective staff development activities, developing curriculum, and using action research. Finally, Hallinger, Murphy, Weil, Mesa, and Mitman (1983) identified three functions of the instructional leader: defining the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting a positive climate for the school.

Prominent Theorists. Several theorists have had a great effect on school leadership, and those are presented here. Warren Bennis, in his 2003 book *On Becoming a Leader*, identified leadership skills necessary for success in the 21st century. First, leaders must be able to engage others through a shared vision. Second, leaders must have a sense of purpose, a sense of self, and self-confidence. Third, leaders must work with a strong moral code and a belief in a higher good. Fourth, leaders must be able to adapt to pressure to change.

Peter Block (2003) identified leadership in a different way as the act of using effective questioning. For Block, leadership skills involved participative design by

holding critical discussions focused on naming the question and learning as opposed to reaching premature closure on solutions.

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, through their work with the Gallup Corporation in 2001 identified 34 “strengths” that individuals in an organization may possess. To build a strengths-based organization, the leader must select the right people and then focus on building their identified strengths, avoiding promoting individuals into areas outside of their identified strengths.

James Collins (2001) had a strong influence on education through his research on organizations that have gone from “good to great.” Collins identified the leaders of great organizations as Level 5 leaders. These leaders are more focused on building a great organization than on drawing attention to themselves. They are intensely committed to doing what matters most, regardless of challenges, looking inward when things go wrong as opposed to blaming external factors. Other characteristics of Level 5 leaders include relying on high standards for attaining goals, getting the right people in place to do the job, creating a culture of discipline, taking an honest look at the facts regarding the organization, and entertaining difficult questions about the organization.

The work of Stephen Covey has been highly influential in educational leadership. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) Covey identified seven behaviors that bring positive results in a variety of situations. Those seven behaviors include 1) Be proactive; 2) Begin with the end in mind; 3) Put first things first; 4) Think win-win; 5) Seek first to understand and then to be understood; 6) Synergize; and 7) Sharpen the saw. In his 1992 book *Principle-Centered Leadership*, Covey built on the seven habits and emphasized the need for leaders to have a strong sense of purpose in

their own lives. Then in his third book *First Things First* (1994) Covey addressed the concept of time management by emphasizing the best use of a person's time. The information found in Covey's books is commonly used in education.

Michael Fullan's contribution to leadership theory focuses on leadership for change, suggesting new ways to think about change that include seeing problems as opportunities and designing schools to be learning communities. In his book *Leading in a Culture of Change* (2001) Fullan identified five characteristics of effective leaders for change: moral purpose, understanding the change process, strong relationships, knowledge sharing, and connecting new with existing knowledge.

What the Principal Needs to Know. Rosborg, McGee, and Burgett (2006) shared Sergiovanni's notion that being the leader of the school has become increasingly complex. In order to be a successful and effective leader, the school's principal needs to care about the students, the staff, the community, his/her family, and him/herself. The principal will need to work hard and be passionate about the job. Trust and patience with others is needed so that collaboration and delegation can occur. Organization is necessary, both in planning and in dealing with paperwork. The effective school leader demonstrates leadership by example and is visible in the school and in the community. Ultimately, the effective school leader understands that the job of principal is still one of the most important jobs in the United States for the good of our society and for the development of current and future citizens.

Whether the principal likes it or not, the role puts her/him into the position of civic leadership and of being a politician. To enhance ownership of the school by its community, the principal must be involved in the community. Civic leadership works by

bonding the school with other organizations and broadening an understanding of the school's needs and the needs of the community. Civic leadership allows the principal to promote positive relations. As a political leader, the principal needs to know who the community's elected officials are and then work with them effectively. As the principal of the school, the role of civic leadership takes time, dedication, commitment, and sacrifice, but it is worth it for the good of the school.

As the chief executive officer of the school, the principal must "walk the talk." There are several important but simple qualities that the principal should consider. These include dressing professionally at work, using appropriate grammar and spelling with no swearing, limiting drinking in social situations for work, staying calm at all times, doing nothing to embarrass family or the school district, always writing emails in a way that they could possibly end up in the newspaper, getting out of the office and into classrooms, and conducting faculty meetings as business meetings.

Because the most effective leadership is shared or distributed in a way that allows all to believe they are responsible for teaching and learning, the school principal must focus on building internal capacity. There are essentially two key points to building internal capacity. First, leadership is about improving teaching and learning. Second, the good leader builds capacity for improving teaching and learning for all students by actively engaging in distributed leadership. This is accomplished by having a focused purpose, communicating a clear vision, maintaining productive relationships, holding individuals accountable, and being accountable for increased student achievement.

School leadership involves the principal being familiar with, and using, educational best practices. A simple definition of best practices is that they are the ideas

that withstand the test of time and various trends in education. Best practices are recognized as being effective in all schools, and their use is vital for a school to be successful. Several best practices are identified below:

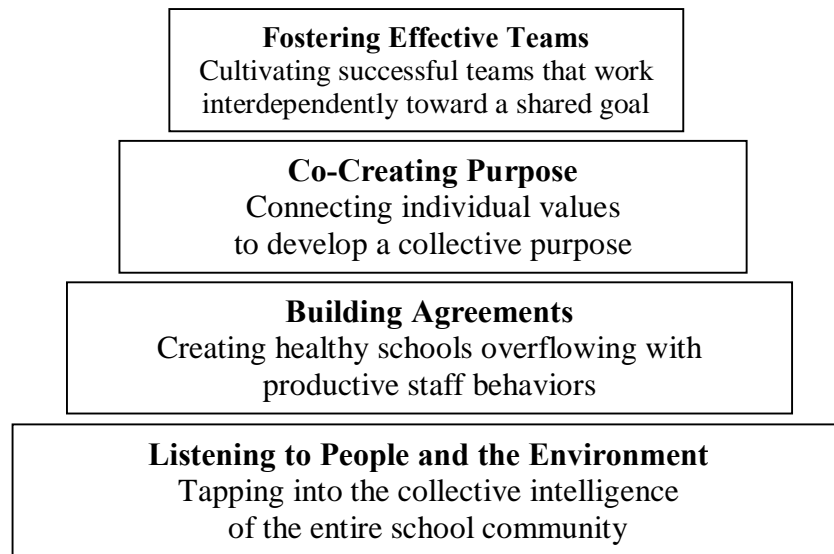
1. Curriculum aligned to state standards
2. Parental involvement
3. Mission statement, campus strategic plan, and written code of conduct
4. Recognition for students and staff
5. School facility sharing with the community where appropriate
6. Student-focused instruction with the goal of high student achievement

Principal leadership involves understanding that, like it or not, in the eye of the public, the quality of a school today is often based upon standardized test scores. On the topic of standards, assessments, and accountability, as the school's leader, the principal must do the following:

- Embrace accountability
- Insist on having quality assessments
- Have a clear understanding of what the assessments measure
- Communicate with the staff and the public regarding the test results
- Make decisions for improving teaching and learning based upon assessment results
- Maintain high expectations for students and staff

Wiseman (2010) provided insight into the principal as foundational leader. In this role as foundational leader, the principal is a change agent who leads successful schools

by focusing on four key foundations. Without these four foundations, the principal will lead without focus and direction. Wiseman's assertion is depicted below:



In a study provided by University of Houston Educational Leadership faculty members and others in 2009, there were 181 people interviewed to gather responses to questions relating to school district support for principals. The study found that principals want their supervisors, whether they are superintendents or other administrators, to do these four things:

1. Support and facilitate their work as instructional leaders. In other words, the principals were saying, "Be there for me."
2. Help them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary as instructional leaders. That is to say, "Teach me."
3. Give them the latitude to exercise unencumbered instructional leadership, or in other words, "Trust me."

4. Frame a vision and purpose, or another way of saying it is that principals want their supervisors to “Paint the big picture,” placing their highest expectations on the principal’s responsibility as instructional leader. (Wimpelberg, et al 2009)

Characteristics of Effective Principals

In 1990, Bass and Stogdill reported the results from 300 trait studies conducted between 1949 and 1990. Table 2-1 indicates the traits and skills that were associated with successful leaders:

Table 2-1
Traits and Skills Associated with Successful Leaders

Traits of Successful Leaders	Skills of Successful Leaders
Adaptable	Intelligent
Alert to social environment	Conceptually skilled
Ambitious and focused on achievement	Creative
Assertive	Diplomatic and tactful
Cooperative	Knowledgeable about group tasks
Decisive	Organized
Dependable	Persuasive
Dominant	Socially skilled
Energetic	
Persistent	
Self confident	
Able to tolerate stress	
Takes initiative	

In her book *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals*, Elaine McEwan (2003) developed a list of ten traits which were identified by an eclectic group of respondents as essential for being a highly effective principal. In her research, McEwan got input from principals, superintendents, central office administrators, university professors, parents, school board members, and education activists. She then identified a diverse group of highly effective principals in various locations within the United States to test the ten traits. Those principals who McEwan studied included individuals who had faced various challenges and shown evidence of bringing a school out of failure, bringing a good school to become a great school, or taking over a highly successful school and maintaining or increasing its level of accomplishment. The ten traits identified as those of highly effective principals are discussed briefly in this section.

The Communicator. This trait was identified as the most important for effectiveness as a principal. Successful principals are in communication virtually 100 percent of the time on the job, involved in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although listening is key in communication, effective principals also write newsletters, summarize school improvement plans, talk with parents individually and collectively, share information at faculty meetings, mentor teachers, teach lessons, chair committees, counsel with students, conference with teachers, present workshops, interview potential employees, write grants, and motivate students.

The Educator. As an educator, the highly effective principal is the instructional leader, with a strong intellect and deep knowledge regarding curriculum, learning, and instruction who facilitates and motivates the growth of self, students, teachers, and

parents. Additionally, as an educator, the principal is a change master, culture builder, visionary, and producer.

The Envisioner. The ability to focus on one great idea and follow it through to completion is the biggest asset of successful school principals. As an envisioner, the highly effective principal is able to see a low-performing or failing school and envision what it will look like as a successful school. Principals who are envisioners are motivated by a sense of calling and purpose, focused on a vision of what can be with a mission that guides her/him to do what is best for all students.

The Facilitator. As a facilitator, the highly effective principal is a leader with strong human relations skills. Such a leader builds individual relationships with students, parents, and teachers; develops collaborative teams with parents and teachers; and establishes a campus community of leaders. Because effective principals understand that relationships drive school improvement, they focus on what's positive and what's working, and they build on strengths rather than dwelling on weaknesses.

The Change Master. In the role of change master, the effective principal is a leader who is flexible, futuristic, and realistic. Additionally, as a change master, the successful principal is able to motivate others and manage change in a positive, organized, and enduring manner.

The Culture Builder. The highly effective principal is a culture builder, a leader who communicates and models a purposeful and strong vision based upon his/her achievement, character, and acceptance of responsibility and accountability. The culture of the school represents the organization's way of thinking, feeling, and perceiving the world. The principal is always on stage, always in the forefront, acting as the captain of

the ship. In this role, the principal takes leadership in causing the school to be the way it is or changing it into what it can be.

The Activator. As an activator, the effective principal is out in the front, looking to see what's coming next and meeting head on whatever is presented. The activator takes initiative, has courage, and has common sense. Such an individual has gumption, that is to say that he/she has drive, motivation, energy, spunk, humor, and enthusiasm.

The Producer. As producers, highly effective principals embrace the philosophy of management guru Peter Drucker (2001) who said that, "Good intentions are no substitute for organization and leadership, for accountability, performance, and results." In the role of producer, the highly effective principal is results-oriented with a strong sense of accountability to all stakeholders who translates high expectations, standards and assessments into realized student achievement.

The Character Builder. The highly effective principal is a character builder, serving as a role model whose words, values and acts are marked by the virtues of trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, respect, humility and generosity. Of course, even the most successful principal is human with flaws, and is not perfect. What separates the effective from the ineffective principal in this role is that effective principals realize they are not perfect.

The Contributor. In the role of contributor, the highly effective principal has the heart of a servant. As a contributor, the principal wants everyone to be successful and believes that she/he is personally responsible for facilitating this success. The servant leader acts as an encourager whose priority is contributing to the success of others.

In his book *What Great Principals Do Differently*, Todd Whitaker (2003) used school-focused studies and his own experience in working with hundreds of administrators to identify 15 things that the most successful principals do. Those 15 qualities and practices are listed as follows:

1. Focus on people, not programs
2. Accept responsibility for the school
3. Treat everyone with respect at all times
4. Filter out the negatives and focus on the positives
5. Teach the teachers
6. Hire great teachers
7. Keep standardized testing in perspective
8. Focus first on behaviors, then on beliefs
9. Demonstrate loyalty to the students, teachers, and the school
10. Make decisions based upon your best teachers
11. Treat everyone as if they were good
12. Understand, be sensitive to, and maximize the ability of high achievers
13. Provide for a caring environment
14. Keep relationships strong
15. Set clear expectations at the beginning of the year

Based upon existing research, Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) identified eight qualities of effective principals. These are listed and described briefly in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2
Qualities of Effective Principals

Principal Quality	Description
Quality 1: Instructional Leadership	Principal facilitates the development, implementation, and evaluation of a shared vision of learning
Quality 2: School Climate	Principal provides for a positive and safe school climate for all stakeholders
Quality 3: Human Resource Administration	Principal hires, trains, supports, and retains quality teachers and support personnel
Quality 4: Teacher Evaluation	Principal conducts meaningful evaluations of teachers and staff to support effectiveness and school improvement
Quality 5: Organizational Management	Principal oversees all aspects of the school's organization, operations, and resources
Quality 6: Communication and Community Relations	Principal collaborates effectively with all stakeholders
Quality 7: Professionalism	Principal demonstrates fairness, integrity, and ethical behavior
Quality 8: Student Achievement	Principal's leadership leads to students' academic growth based upon established standards

Roles and Challenges of the School Principal

Sergiovanni (2006) reported that there is much evidence that the role of, and the challenges facing, the principal are changing. According to Sergiovanni, there is broad consensus among principals that the landmark federal initiative No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a challenge to implement. One out of every three principals claims that implementation of NCLB is his/her most pressing issue. One of the biggest concerns is that NCLB has huge requirements, but is an unfunded mandate. Additional concerns expressed by principals include NCLB's heavy reliance on standardized test scores, its intrusion by the federal government into areas normally handled by state and local government, and the consequences NCLB presents for schools that do not measure up are unfair.

In a study done in 1998, the National Association of Elementary School Principals reported that principals have experienced significant increases in responsibility in the areas identified below:

Principal's Area of Responsibility	Percent of Increase
1. Marketing/politicking to gain support for the school	70%
2. Working with social agencies	66%
3. Planning and implementing professional development	66%
4. Developing instructional practices	64%
5. Developing curriculum	62%
6. Working with site-based committees	62%
7. Focusing on legal issues related to potential legal liability	58%

In a study of elementary, middle, and high school principals (EdSource, 1998) it was found that principals would prefer to spend more time on teaching and learning and less time on issues that have to do with budget, parents, and student behaviors. The study also found that principals would maintain their current level of time spent on supervision and community relations, that being at about 27 percent of their time.

In his March, 2010 article, Michael Fullan discussed the awesome power of the principal. Always focusing on change leadership, Fullan identified six steps for principals to take to move theory to practice in organizational change. First, give attention to relationships and communication; second, participate as a learner; third, focus on instruction; fourth, develop others; fifth, network with others inside and outside the school building; and sixth, realize the moral purpose and embrace the mission that all kids can learn.

High School Principals. Other than the superintendent and the district's athletic director, there is no position more visible than the high school principal. Charles Judd (1918) provided his research findings regarding the doings of high school principals. Judd collected from experienced teachers, school principals and superintendents about 100 statements identifying the duties of the high school principal. At that time, the most frequently observed responsibility of the principal was coordination of the activities of the school. Specifically, the principal must coordinate the various school departments working together, assure that teachers are working together, and bring students and the community into harmony with the plans identified for the school.

During the school day (remembering that this information comes from 1918) the high school principal must give time to each of the following:

1. Faculty meetings to establish study habits and manage school activities
2. Meetings with department heads
3. Assembly programs
4. Daily announcements
5. Elections for student organizations, i.e. Glee Club, and Class Officers
6. Physical examination by the school nurse of all female students
7. Physical examination by physicians of all male students
8. Vocational guidance provided in each English class one time every two weeks
9. Classroom visits
10. Schedule changes, as requested by teachers, to avoid off failure
11. Correspondence with school alumni
12. Teacher/parent meetings

13. Monthly meetings with the Student Council
14. After-school functions
15. Student and teacher absences
16. Democratic environment where everyone is busy, happy, enthusiastic, and successful
17. Student discipline
18. Professional growth through reading magazine articles
19. State and national education conferences

In their book *The Productive High School*, Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, and McGaughy (2001) identified four common challenges for high school principals: focusing the activities of the school on quality student learning and achievement; nurturing a collaborative and participatory relationship among staff; promoting reflection, innovation, and development aligned with the school's mission; and gaining the support that teachers need to enhance the quality of instruction.

The best high schools have principals who see their most important task as establishing the school culture. In this role of cultural leader, the high school principal works to define, articulate, and strengthen values and beliefs that give the school its own identity. The principal is able to promote the school's vision for success through the use of collaboration, consensus-building, personal influence, and modeling.

In the role of instructional leader, practices which high school principals focus on vary. However, some of the most consistently used practices include spending time with teachers to determine their instructional strengths and areas for improvement; meeting with small groups of teachers or students to hear suggestions for improvement; increasing

academic rigor; and providing for professional development activities to meet the needs of the school.

Because of the comprehensive nature of high schools and the demands placed upon the principal, being a successful instructional and cultural leader is difficult to accomplish and is often more of a goal than a reality. Most high school principals say that they spend the greatest part of their day on administrative and managerial tasks rather than actually affecting teaching and learning. Strategies that allow the high school leader to focus on his/her role as cultural and instructional leader are needed, and in successful high schools, such strategies are in place and show evidence of enhanced student learning.

Silva and Mackin (2002) in their work on reform and redesign of American high schools found that the ultimate role of the principal is to be the vision-keeper. With high school reform, the principal must lead the charge that every student counts, and no student is to fall through the cracks. A personalized learning environment for high school students is needed in order to embrace them in the academic process. For the principal and the entire school and community, creating human connections is the vehicle for engaging students in academic success.

Using a focus group approach, Rayfield and Diamantes (2004) identified 25 job specific tasks of secondary principals as listed below:

1. Hiring teachers
2. Evaluating teachers
3. Assigning teachers to teach specific courses
4. Leading professional development activities

5. Developing the master schedule
6. Developing cooperative relationships
7. Enforcing policies and procedures
8. Ensuring the school is safe
9. Handling disruptive students
10. Monitoring and handling student attendance concerns
11. Working with parents regarding student behaviors
12. Developing and aligning curriculum
13. Focusing on accountability standards
14. Complying with state and federal mandates
15. Supervising special education services
16. Publishing and distributing school newsletters
17. Attending community events
18. Providing awards and recognition programs for students
19. Developing the budget
20. Managing the budget
21. Supervising fundraising activities
22. Identifying athletic coaches
23. Evaluating non-instructional personnel
24. Attending and supervising after-school activities
25. Managing maintenance and facilities personnel

Pamela Salazar (2007) collected data from high school principals in seven states (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington) relating to their

perception of what professional development activities they need most to lead schools to improvement. In that study, the results suggested that the principals recognized their strongest needs involve their role as instructional leader. The areas with the least need for professional development identified by the high school principals surrounded management and operational procedures. The results of the study pointed to the principals' concerns with their skills in leadership over management, and to their clear recognition of a need for more professional development in establishing a collaborative learning community. Specifically, the high school principals identified their most important needs for professional development in the areas of:

- Building a team commitment
- Creating a learning organization
- Motivating for and sustaining continuous improvement
- Focusing the school on results-oriented instruction
- Communicating effectively
- Facilitating change

In a survey conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), George (2001) summarized how high school principals spend their days. Responses from 3,359 high school principals throughout the United States indicated that administrative duties, not including student activities and special events, take up 62 hours per week. Most of the principals reported that they spend most of their time meeting with parents, handling discipline, performing community-related tasks, and managing the facilities.

Although high school principals realize the importance of instructional leadership, they are able to devote very little time to the role of instructional leader. When asked what they believed to be the three most important responsibilities of their job, the high school principals identified 1) establishing a supportive climate for learning; 2) handling personnel issues; and 3) providing instructional leadership, including spending time in classrooms. When asked what the barriers are to attending to these three responsibilities, they cited excessive paperwork and an overall lack of time. More than half of the responding principals also indicated that a lack of financial resources impedes their effectiveness.

Truly, the challenges facing high school principals are formidable: low student achievement, achievement gaps, low graduation rates with high dropout rates, and low levels of academic rigor. All of these challenges are symptomatic of systemic problems which impede change. The results of this NASSP survey signal an urgent need for high school principals to decrease their time in management activities and increase the time spent as instructional leaders. To accomplish this, principals need relevant professional development, organizational structures, additional personnel to assist with school management, and resources to support necessary change. As Hodgkinson said in 2000, "The key player in the march toward better schools is the secondary school principal."

Chapter Two Summary

Chapter Two has provided a review of literature regarding principal leadership, characteristics of effective principals, and the roles and challenges of the school principal. The literature review has also provided a focus on the roles and challenges specific to high school principals. As the literature review identified, high school principals are

facing an increasing number of and level of responsibilities and challenges with little or no relief in sight.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter includes information about the research methodology used in designing the *High School Principal Interview Questions*, collecting and analyzing data for the study, and addressing the study's research questions. Chapter Three includes the following sections: study design, study participants, instrumentation and data collection, ethical considerations, data analysis, and limitations.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. Research questions addressed in the study include:

1. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding their role as the school principal, and how do these perceptions align with what they actually do daily?
2. What do high school principals perceive are their greatest challenges?
3. What do current high school principals recommend as professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals?

This study is one of qualitative design, exploratory in nature. Qualitative research was defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as, "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification." In this study, qualitative research was used in order to gain a more holistic impression of the perceptions of high school principals regarding their roles and challenges. Easterbrook and Given (2008) identified qualitative methods to be typically

used in research projects with a human-focused perspective in the design and implementation of the investigation.

Study Participants

The participants in this study consisted of current high school principals within a medium-sized public school district in Texas. Because the participants were identified from a predetermined population and the information was collected at one point in time, this is considered a cross-sectional survey. Each of the 14 high school principals in the district was invited to participate in the study. Eleven of the 14 campuses are considered as comprehensive high schools with the other three being alternative high schools.

Demographic information relating to the participants was determined through observation, school district reports, and the researcher's knowledge about the study participants. Each participant's demographic data was verified by the researcher during the interviews. Of the principals invited to participate, six were female and eight, male. Eight of the principals were white, with five African American, and one Hispanic. Age of the participants was not determined for this research study. Experience level of the invitees currently in the role of high school principal was confirmed through the interview process. Educationally, each principal invited to participate in the study was at least at the level of a master's degree.

Total student population of the high schools where participants in this study serve as principal was identified through review of the district's enrollment reports from October, 2011. Student population in the district's 11 comprehensive high schools range from 1,117 to 2,655. The three specialized high schools contain 44, 52, and 211 students. Table 3-1 provides demographic information about the principals invited to participate in

this study as well as the number of students enrolled in the high schools where the principals are located.

Table 3-1: *Demographic Information of Population by Gender, Race, High School Principal Experience, Educational Level and Total Students in the High School*

Gender	Race	Years as High School Principal	Educational Level	Total Number of Students
Male	White	5	Masterø	2,142
Female	White	6	Masterø	2,002
Male	Hispanic	3	Masterø	44
Male	White	1	Pursuing Doctorate	2,655
Female	White	2	Pursuing Doctorate	2,423
Male	African American	2	Masterø	1,350
Male	African American	2	Masterø	52
Female	White	2	Masterø	1,117
Female	African American	7	Pursuing Doctorate	2,105
Male	White	2	Masterø	1,406
Female	African American	3	Masterø	2,319
Female	White	6	Masterø	2,314
Male	African American	3	Masterø	211
Male	White	2	Doctorate	2,406

Source: District Reports (October 2011)

Principals identified for participation in this study were initially contacted by the researcher through email. Appendix A contains the *Consent to Participate in Confidential Research* letter that was sent via email to the participants. The consent letter contains the questions used during the interview, giving participants the opportunity to see and reflect upon those questions prior to the actual interview. Upon receipt of

agreement in writing from each participant, the researcher contacted principals individually to set a meeting time and date for the personal interview. Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants, each done on the high school campus where the participant serves as principal.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Data collected for this study came primarily from interviews conducted with high school principals. The interview questions were designed to address the principals' perceptions of their roles, their challenges, and their recommendations for professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals. Because the purpose of interviewing people is to find out what they think or how they feel, collecting data through the use of interviews for this study was appropriate. According to Patton (1990), we interview people to find out from them the things we cannot directly observe. We have to ask people questions about their feelings, thoughts, and intentions. In his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Irving Seidman (1998) states,

Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provide access to understanding their actions. (Seidman, 1998, p. 4)

The researcher drew from aspects of cognitive interviewing techniques for this study. As defined by Gordon Willis (1999), this approach is used to gain information

through the cognitive processes of the interviewees. Willis identified four general features of cognitive interviewing that were applicable for this research project. Those features include 1) focusing on the interview questionnaire; 2) focusing on the cognitive processes that respondents use to answer interview questions; 3) identifying volunteer subjects for the interview and conducting the interview in a laboratory-type environment; and 4) identifying subjects with specific characteristics.

Interviews for this project were predicted to last from 60 to 90 minutes each. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher read from a script for the purpose of standardizing and clarifying questions for participants during the interview. A copy of that script is found as Appendix D of this report. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in their entirety by the researcher. Bucher, Fritz, and Quarantelli (1956) asserted that audio recording an interview is especially valuable in research that is exploratory in nature. Having the audio tape to recreate the interview in its entirety enables the researcher to capture material often lost in written surveys or by taking notes during an interview. Five basic advantages of using tape recording of interviews for social research were identified as the following:

1. As opposed to taking notes during an interview, audio taping allows the researcher to capture 100 percent of the participant's comments
2. Audio taping eliminates a major source of interviewer bias by prohibiting selective recording of data on the part of the interviewer
3. Audio taping an interview provides an objective basis for evaluating the adequacy of the interview data

4. Audio taping allows the interviewer to provide his/her full attention to the respondent during the interview
5. Time is saved for the interviewer by audio taping as opposed to taking notes or reconstructing the interview responses from memory

A copy of the interview questions used for this study is found in Appendix A of this report. The interview questions were grouped purposefully into three main categories: Introductory Information; Roles and Challenges; and Professional Development Information and Recommendations. There were three questions in the introductory information section that provided data regarding the participant's educational background, length of time in current position, and career history prior to appointment into the current position. The second category contained three questions regarding the participant's perceptions of his/her role, most important responsibilities, and challenges they face as high school principals. The final section included four questions relating to professional development. Participants were asked to identify the professional development activities in which they engaged to prepare for becoming a high school principal. Each principal was then asked to answer if he/she participated in the aspiring principals' academy provided by the current school district or any other venue to assist with principal preparation. The third professional development question asked each participant to identify experiences as an assistant principal that equipped him/her for the role as high school principal. The final interview question asked each of the participants to identify professional development activities and experiences that she/he would recommend to prepare for the increasing and varying responsibilities of high school principals.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for conducting this research study was secured from the Jenville ISD Department of Research and Program Evaluation. Appendix B provides a copy of the approval email from Jenville ISD. Names of the school district and school district individuals involved were redacted from the email for purposes of this study. Consent was also gained from the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. A copy of the approval letter from the university can be found in Appendix C. Participants in this research study identified their approval on the *Consent to Participate in Confidential Research* letter found in Appendix A. Copies of the written approval forms from the university, from the school district, and from participants will be confidentially maintained by the researcher.

Participants were told in the *Consent to Participate* letter that participation in the research project is voluntary, and that they could refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer any question during the in-person interview. Participation in the research study was voluntary with the only alternative being non-participation. There was no penalty for anyone identified to participate in the study who chose not to participate.

Every effort was made to maintain the confidentiality within legal limits of participants in the research project. Participants were confidentially paired with a code number by the researcher and that code number does not appear within the results of the research project. The list pairing the participants' names with code numbers was kept separate from all research materials, available only to the principal investigator. No names of participants or schools were included in the study's results.

There were no foreseeable risks to the subjects for participating in this research project. Although there were no direct benefits for participation in the study, each participant received a copy of the completed research paper. The report provides for the study participants an addition to their body of knowledge as well as a review of suggestions for professional development activities and experiences that will help to better prepare aspiring high school principals.

Data Analysis

Savenye and Robinson (2005) identified interviews in research as interactive, verbal techniques used to collect data related to the questions of the study. Later, the data are analyzed to determine emerging themes that result from the interview responses. For this study, the data transcribed from audio taped interviews were organized and aligned to the research questions to determine any themes arising from the interview responses.

In the book *Qualitative Research Methods*, Liamputtong (2009) noted that qualitative inquiry requires the data that have been collected to be organized in a meaningful manner for analysis. For purposes of this study, a thematic analysis was used. States Liamputtong, "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data." Two main steps in doing the thematic analysis were used for this study. First, the researcher focused on making sense of the data by closely reviewing the transcribed interviews from individual principals. Then the researcher examined the transcribed interviews to make sense of what was said by the participants as a group. This thematic analysis involved searching the interview responses to find patterns (themes) that were meaningful. The researcher worked to

deconstruct the data, using codes to find common links that allowed the organization of categories and sub-categories leading to themes coming out of the data.

For this qualitative study, the researcher carried out the tasks of identifying what was learned from doing the interviews; reviewed, marked, and labeled the interview transcripts; and organized the responses of the principals into categorical themes.

Questions that the interviewer asked while reviewing the transcripts include: What common threads were there among the experiences of the study participants? How did the data from the interviews align with the literature review? How did the data differ from the literature? What surprises came from the data review?

Limitations

There were challenges inherent in the choice to conduct qualitative research. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) defined qualitative data analysis as "working with data, organizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others." Creativity on the part of the researcher was required. The challenge in this research project involved placing the interview data into logical, meaningful categories; examining the categories in a holistic manner; and finally communicating the interpretation into writing.

Some limitations were incurred that involved the study participants. Although 14 high school principals were invited to participate in the study, it was not originally known if all would agree to be interviewed. It was known by the researcher that, initially, two members of the identified population were out on extended medical leave and may not have been available to interview. Principals identified for participation may also have

been reluctant to devote the time necessary for the interview or to provide genuine responses.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter has provided an explanation of the research methodology that was used for collecting and analyzing data to address the research questions of the study.

Using a qualitative design, exploratory in nature, the goal of this study was to provide data regarding current perceptions of high school principals regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to become high school principals.

Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals in a mid-size Texas school district regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. Chapter Four provides the results of the data analysis, focusing on information derived from individual interviews conducted with 13 high school principals. Included in this chapter is information about the high school principal interviews, sample group data, data from the transcribed interviews, themes from the data, and findings for each research question.

This study seeks to answer three research questions:

Research Question One. What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding their role as the school principal, and how do these perceptions align with what they actually do daily?

Research Question Two. What do high school principals perceive are their greatest challenges?

Research Question Three. What do current high school principals recommend as professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals?

High School Principal Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the 13 participating high school principals. Each interview was conducted during the months of December 2011 and January 2012 in the office of each principal, with the researcher following a

prescribed protocol. The principals were provided a copy of the interview questions in advance. Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, a script was read aloud by the researcher in an effort to further clarify the interview questions and the interview process. A copy of that script is found in this study as Appendix D.

The interview approach was used for this study to solicit participants' perceptions regarding their roles, responsibilities, challenges and recommendations for professional development to prepare for the position of high school principal. During the interview, the researcher had the opportunity to obtain detailed descriptions of experiences from the participants to enhance the data collection. Following the interviews, the information was transcribed and each participant was assigned a code number (P1 through P13) in order to maintain confidentiality. Data from the interviews, including direct quotes from the principals interviewed is identified in this report through the use of the coding as P1 representing Principal 1, P2 representing Principal 2, and so forth through P13 representing Principal 13.

Sample

Information regarding the frequency and percentages for each variable within the sample for the study is provided in Table 4-1 through Table 4-4. Out of a total population of 14 high school principals, 13 pre-identified from a mid-size Texas school district, made up the sample. Ten of the participants were principals of comprehensive high schools with the other three serving as principals at alternative high school campuses. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic data of the high school principals who participated in the study.

In Table 4-1 the gender analysis shows that more of the participants were men ($n = 8$, 61.5%) than women ($n = 5$, 38.5%).

Table 4-1
Gender of Participants (Frequency and Percentage)

Gender	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Male	8	61.5
Female	5	38.5
Total	13	100.0

Table 4-2 provides data regarding the race of the study participants, showing that the majority of high school principals participating in the study were white ($n = 8$, 61.5%) followed by African American principals ($n = 4$, 30.8%) and then Hispanic ($n = 1$, 7.7%).

Table 4-2
Race of Participants (Frequency and Percentage)

Race	Frequency	Percent of Sample
White	8	61.5
African American	4	30.8
Hispanic	1	7.7
Total	13	100.0

As a group, the 13 study participants averaged 24.6 years of experience in education, ranging from a low of 12 years to a high of 43 years. Four of the participants (30.8%) had over 25 years of experience in education. Both the median and the mode of the sample group is 23 years, with five of the 13 participating principals having 23 years of service in education. This information is identified in Table 4-3.

Table 4-3
Experience in Education of the Participants

Lowest number of years in education	12 years
Highest number of years in education	43 years
Mean of the participant group	24.6 years
Median of the participant group	23 years
Mode of the participant group	23 years
Range of the participant group	31 years

As shown in Table 4-4, the majority of the participants in the sample had reached the level of Master's degree ($n = 9$, 69.2%). Only one (7.7%) had obtained the doctorate, with three of the principals (23.1%) currently working on the doctorate.

Table 4-4
Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Highest Degree Earned

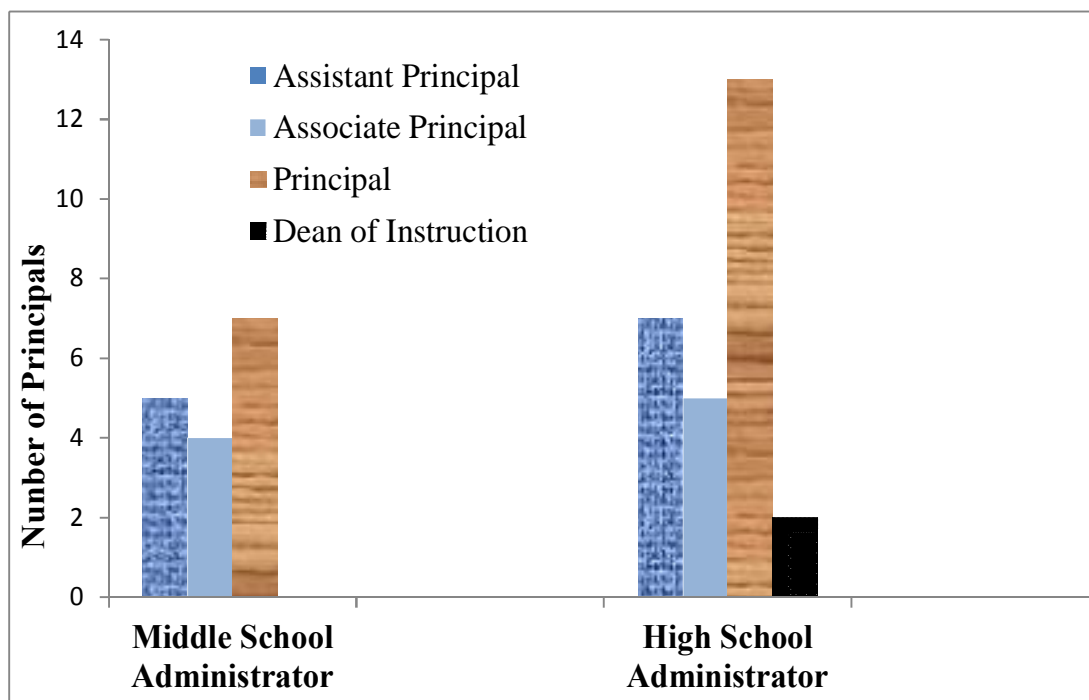
Post Graduate Level	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Master's Degree	9	69.2
Doctorate	1	7.7
Master's with Doctorate in Progress	3	23.1
Total	13	100.0

Teaching Background and Administrative Experience. All participants, as high school principals, hold the appropriate certification for being a school principal. Additionally, as required for principal certification, all of the participants spent time as a classroom teacher. From the interview responses, there were 15 different teaching

certifications identified by the 13 participants. Five of the respondents (38.4%) spoke of being a department head during their time as a teacher. P1 responded, “I think serving as a department head was pivotal in my preparation for learning to deal with the public, the community, and having conversations with people.”

Table 4-5 displays the administrative levels of experience of the high school principals in this study. Respondents had all served in the role of assistant principal either at the middle school or at the high school level, or both. Two (15.4%) had also served in the role of high school dean of instruction, and five (38.5%) spent time as a high school associate principal. Four of the respondents (30.8%) had served as middle school associate principal, and seven (53.8%) had been middle school principals prior to becoming a high school principal.

Table 4-5
Participants’ Administrative Experience



Several interesting comments were made by the participants regarding their administrative experiences prior to their current position. When asked if coming into the high school principalship via only spending time as a high school assistant principal would work, P2 stated, "It would have been tough to come into a high school that way. I wouldn't recommend it, and I probably wouldn't have asked for it." Additionally, one of the current high school principals who had previously been a middle school principal was asked this question during the interview: "Do you think that your experiences as a high school assistant principal or as middle school principal are more valuable in your daily work here as a high school principal, or are they kind of equal?" The response was,

I would say being a high school assistant principal because I wouldn't compare middle school to high school at all. If you're a middle school principal and you've never had high school experience, it's going to be a big time culture shock. These kids are different, and if you don't know how to talk to these kids who are as big as you, you'll have a hard time. So I think you need to be a high school assistant principal first, or you need to do some type of internship at high school before you take on this job. (P13)

From the participant group, there were some unique findings identified in the study. Only one of the principals had also served in the role of school counselor. During the interview, P5 responded, "I think the counseling was very, very important. I use my counseling skills on any given day with students, parents, and staff and I think that has helped tremendously."

Prior to being named a high school principal, one of the participants had never worked in a high school, and stated, "I hadn't been in a high school since I was in high

school. I learned a lot the first semester, and then the second year was much easier.ö

(P9) Interestingly enough, in comparison, there were only two of the 13 participants (15.4%) who had spent their entire career working in the high school setting.

Two of the principals (15.4%) have actually served as a campus administrator on five different campuses in their current district. Of the 13 high school principals, four (30.8%) have opened new buildings in the role of principal, and one has opened three new buildings as a principal in the current district. Two of the study participants (15.4%) grew up and attended schools in the district where they currently serve as high school principal. Table 4-6 provides teaching and administrative experience for each principal.

Table 4-6
Teaching and Administrative Experience by Principal

Teaching Certification	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Administrative Experience		Years in Current Position	Total Years in Education
		Asst/Assoc Principal or Dean	Middle or High School Principal		
Health; PE; Elementary Ed.	14	13	6	3	33
Biology, History; PE	9	6	8	1	23
Art	4	5	3	2	12
Social Studies	5	11	3	1	19
Social Studies; Special Ed.	14	14	14	5	42
English	7.5	3.5	5	5	16
Elementary. Ed.; Counseling	11 Teaching 5 Counseling	5	6	6	27
Science; PE	22	5	16	2	43
Special Education	13	8	2	2	23
Mathematics	4.5	5	3	2	12.5
Biology; ESL; Bilingual	10	10	3	3	23
Language. Arts; Health; PE	12	4	7	2	23
Social Studies	11.5	7.5	4	4	23

Research Question One Themes and Summary

The first research question focused on the perceptions of the study participants in regard to their role as high school principal and what they perceive to be their most important responsibilities in the role. To address this question, each principal was asked two questions. The first question was worded as: "Being a high school principal is a difficult job. What are your perceptions of your role as high school principal?" The second question asked, "What do you perceive to be the most important responsibilities for a high school principal?" Table 4-7 provides six themes with the frequency they were identified by the study participants regarding their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as high school principals. Following the table is a discussion of each of these themes.

Table 4-7

Themes Identified by the Researcher of Study Participants' Perceptions of the Roles/Responsibilities of High School Principals

High School Principal Role/Responsibility	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Quality instruction/quality teachers	13	100
Organizational management	13	100
Communication/relationships/motivation	10	76.9
Safe learning environment	7	53.8
Accountability and policy	6	46.2
Leadership and culture	4	30.8

Quality Instruction and Quality Teachers. All of the 13 principals discussed something about their role and/or responsibility with providing quality instruction and hiring quality teachers. Principal 9 framed this theme by stating,

You have to continue working with your teachers to build good, solid instruction.

I think the number one job of a principal every year is the hiring process. If you hire the right people, your job gets easier and easier as it goes along. The curriculum gets easier, and the management of the students gets easier because you have a team approach that you don't a lot of times have if the right people aren't working for you. (P9)

Four of the principals (30.8%) used the term *instructional leader* or *instructional leadership* in reference to their roles and responsibilities as the high school principal. As Principal 8 stated, "If principals don't get into the classrooms to oversee exactly what is being taught, then we will have some huge problems in the future." (P8) Additional statements made by the principals during the interviews that focused on instructional leadership include,

- The most important responsibility is instructional leadership in my opinion. We're responsible for making sure that our teachers are providing quality instruction. We have to know what the quality of instruction is that we're offering, that teachers are following through on our mission and goals, and that we're managing this as an instructional leader and moving in the right direction, on that cycle of continuous improvement. (P4)
- For me, my role as the leader comes from the instructional leadership. It comes down to daily practices in the classroom. Am I, as the principal affecting change through modeling what I expect through looking at data? The leadership comes from the influence, the helping others to share the responsibility for the teach, learn, do, act cycle. (P1)

- I am an instructional leader, and if I am not growing other instructional leaders, I am not effective. (P7)

The importance of hiring quality teachers and getting the right people into position in the school was mentioned by four (30.8%) of the high school principals.

Principal 5 summed it up as,

One of the most important responsibilities for a high school principal is hiring the best staff you can possibly hire because if you hire a good staff, then you have good instruction. If you hire the right staff, all things fall into place. (P5)

Organizational Management. A second theme emerging from the data in the study involves the high school principals role and responsibilities with the daily organizational management of the school. Correlating with this theme are topics described by the principals involving budget management, extracurricular management, cleanliness of the building, and discipline management. All of the principals made some comment about responsibilities that could be defined as components of organizational management. The statements that follow come from the principals involving this theme.

- We could talk about the role of the principal as the manager. We could talk of the principal as the person who keeps the building running. Then we could talk about the role of just being the budget manager of everything. (P3)
- As the manager, I have to have my hand on a lot of things. I have to know what good management is. The manager needs to know how to run the cash register, even though we have cashiers. (P7)
- There is a lot of responsibility as a high school principal. There are many things you have to touch, including completion rates, graduation rates, TAKS

testing, PSAT, SAT, EOC. You have to be well rounded and know about a lot of things because this is the ending part of children's public education, so you want make sure they go out strong and know where they're going. (P13)

- We have to keep our campus safe and clean. I'm responsible for the campus and it goes from the landscape to what happens inside of the building to teaching. It just encompasses everything. This is not a job where you can sit in the office and run the building. You've got to get out. You've got to be in classes. You've got to interact with children. I walk this building every day, sometimes seven, eight times a day. I do lunch duty. I talk to kids, talk to teachers, and observe what they're doing. (P8)

Communication, Team Building, Relationships, and Motivation. A third theme that emerged from the participant interviews in regard to their role and responsibilities as high school principal involved communication, building teams and relationships, and motivation. Ten of the 13 study participants (76.9%) included comments about one or more of these in their responses about their roles and responsibilities. Statements by the principals linked to this theme include:

- The most important responsibility is letting people know what's important to you, and for me it's the big three non-negotiables: professionalism, teamwork, and focusing on kids . . . everything with a purpose. I attend events to cheer on the students. As for the parents, if they feel you're genuine, you're trustworthy, and you really are there for the students, I've found they'll trust you're there to do the right thing. (P2)
- My job is to help my staff to help students believe they can be successful. (P10)

- The principal has to be the motivator. (P3)
- Focusing on employee morale and providing parental communication are parts of my role as principal. (P4)
- I use my counseling skills on any given day with students, parents, and staff. (P5)
- You see, failure is not an option for me. Students have to be motivated. They are not lazy, just unmotivated, and they have to be motivated for their own success. (P6)
- The way you get things done in this role is to build good teams with good people. As principal, I always want to surround myself with people who are smarter than me, people who can get the job done. You need people who are experts in different areas, and putting teams together the right way is an important role of the principal. You get the right teacher teams in place because they are the ones that are going to make that difference. (P3)
- I have to communicate with the major stakeholders. I have got to be able to sit down and talk with the teacher who is worried that her kids aren't performing, or with the parent of the child who is not going to graduate, or with the students about to take the PSAT. You have to be a people person. We must be great listeners. People just want to be heard. (P7) In direct contrast to this statement, Principal 8 stated, "I am not a people pleaser. I am not in the people pleasing business. I am here first of all to make the students successful." (P8)

Safe Learning Environment. Based on the data collected from the interviews, it is evident that the high school principals in this study felt strongly that providing a safe learning environment, theme four, is an important part of their role as the school's leader.

Of the 13 study participants, seven (53.8%) stated that safety and security are part of their role and/or their responsibility as the high school principal. Principal statements about this theme include:

- The key thing is you want to create an environment for learning, and one that's safe. If you don't make it safe, no learning's going to take place. (P6)
- Safety is job one, and right next to that is the accountability piece. (P7)
- The most important responsibility of the high school principal is keeping the school safe. That's for the children, for the staff, for the parents that come here, it's for everybody. If you've got things going wild and crazy, that's not a good environment, and we're here to protect the children. (P10)
- Safety is a big responsibility. I think safety wasn't a big concern 20 years ago, but it is now. You think about it every time somebody walks up from the parking lot that you don't recognize. (P12)

Accountability and Policy Knowledge. From the information obtained during the interviews with the study participants, a fifth theme that emerged was the high school principal's responsibility regarding accountability issues and having a strong knowledge of educational policy. During the interviews with high school principals, six of the 13 study participants (46.2%) mentioned either accountability issues and/or the necessity of having a strong knowledge of educational policy and procedures. With the transition in Texas during the 2011-12 school year from the state accountability system surrounding the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) to the new STAAR (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness), it would seem appropriate that high school principals are focused on accountability as an important part of their roles and

responsibilities. Several principal statements regarding accountability and policy are provided as follows:

- There is that big word, the accountability piece, that never leaves a principal's vision. A part of my responsibility means having an acceptable accountability rating. (P7)
- There is a lot of responsibility, a lot of notoriety working as the principal of a high school. This is about completion rates, graduation rates, TAKS testing, PSAT, SAT. (P13)
- One of my responsibilities involves policy. I am a stickler for following district policy. I make sure whatever I am doing as principal is aligned with district policy. (P9)
- You better know some policy, and there are probably 10 or 12, maybe 18 different policies you better know well and be able to speak intelligently about at any given time. (P3)
- I am the keeper because I need to have a good command of policy. People are constantly coming to me, and I know I am the resource for my teachers, community, even for students. So I have to support policy and know what the district initiatives are. That's one integral piece to the global picture. (P7)

Leadership and Establishing the Culture of the School. Statements were made by four (30.8%) of the principals in regard to their roles and responsibilities that could be considered as involving leadership or establishing the culture of the school. Statements that support this final theme are provided as follows:

- I think one of the jobs the principal has is to, right or wrong, make the school represent his or her philosophy, their beliefs, what they value. I think the principal needs to be there to set a tone, to set the course, and try to keep everybody running. (P12)
- It's like being the mayor of a small town. Imagine you're under a microscope every second because everyone's watching how you respond, how you deal with things, what's important to you, what you focus on. (P2)
- The biggest responsibility of the high school principal is moving the students. Period. Moving the students. (P13)
- I've learned that I have to keep my focus on the leadership piece, on the instructional leadership. All the management pieces are distractions, just the stuff that's got to be done. (P1)

Research Question One Summary. When identifying their perceptions of their role and responsibilities, the high school principals in this study provided many responses. Initially, there were often broad, generalized answers, such as, "We could talk about the role of the high school principal for hours. It's like being a politician." (P8) However, there are definite themes that arose from the interview responses from high school principals in this study regarding their perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. These include, in no preferential order:

1. Providing a safe and secure learning environment
2. Hiring quality teachers and staff and acting as the school's instructional leader
3. Managing all aspects of the daily operation of the organization
4. Providing leadership and setting the tone for the culture of the school

5. Understanding and communicating the role of accountability while being familiar with and supporting educational policy
6. Communicating with all stakeholders, focusing on teamwork and building relationships, and motivating staff and students

Research Question Two Themes and Summary

The study's second research question dealt with high school principals' perceptions of their greatest challenges. During the interview, each participant was asked, "What do you think are the greatest challenges that you face as high school principal?" Based on responses to this question, five themes emerged, and are identified in Table 4-8.

Table 4-8

Themes Identified by the Researcher of Study Participants' Perceptions of Challenges of High School Principals

High School Principal Challenges	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Funding and accountability	6	46.2
Hiring and personnel issues	6	46.2
Instruction and motivation	4	30.8
Time management	3	23.1
Safety and management of the building	2	15.4

Funding and Accountability. Challenges were identified in the area of funding and accountability by six of the 13 high school principals (46.2%). Accountability, based upon the need to move students, to assure they pass the various state tests and that they graduate was identified as the greatest challenge by Principal 13, stating, "Really in a

nutshell, the biggest challenge is to insure that the kids are successful on the tests.ö (P13)

Principal 12 tied in accountability with funding by identifying the biggest challenge for the high school principal as implementing legislative mandates that are unfunded.

Stating that the unfunded mandates come more from the federal and state government than from local government, Principal 12 claimed extreme frustration with more and more accountability without any real funding support. Principal 3 made these statements on the topic of funding:

One of our greatest challenges, and it's not our fault, it's the state's fault, is just the lack of money. When the state cuts \$4 billion across the state, and they don't have a good funding formula that's fair and equitable for all schools, every school suffers, and it presents certain challenges. I don't have enough staff to put into the classrooms, class sizes are getting too big, I have staff teaching multiple preps or things they don't really have the background knowledge for ó those are all problems that we have to deal with. It's just a problem with funding. (P3)

Hiring and Personnel Issues. Challenges with hiring quality people and getting key people into the school, along with personnel issues were identified by six (46.2%) of the high school principals. Principal 11 framed this theme by stating, "Hiring quality people is the most important thing because what happens when the classroom door closes is what's going to dictate our success." Principal 4 added, "Obviously you work hard to surround yourself with quality people," as well as, "I'd rather be in classrooms than putting out fires with employees and staffing issues."

Instruction and Motivating Students and Staff. Instructional challenges and the need to motivate the students and staff were identified by four (30.8%) of the high school principals. Principal 5 stated,

My greatest challenge is probably dealing with the instructional challenges in a diverse high school. We have kids coming in at all different levels, so it's challenging to meet the needs of each and every student. Being a diverse campus is one thing I love about this campus, but we do have kids with all kinds of needs, and just trying to meet those needs and provide the very best education and prepare them for the next step in life is probably our biggest challenge. (P5)

Principal 9 focused on the challenges associated with motivating students and staff on a daily basis. Pointing out that teachers get worn down by management activities as the school year progresses, P9 stressed that it is the principal's challenge to keep them going in the right direction. Principal 11 stated, "The teachers are my customers. I have to support them." Regarding motivating students, Principal 9 identified the need for showing them why they are in school and keeping them focused on the ultimate goal as challenges.

Time Management. Three of the study participants (23.1%) felt that time management is one of their greatest challenges in the role of high school principal. Statements from two principals are provided as follows.

For me, my greatest challenge is time. It's just having enough time to do everything. (P2)

Time management is my gigantic challenge, personally. The management tasks can consume you, and our job is to make sure they don't. I'd rather be in

classrooms than answering email or putting out fires with employees. We have to literally build in time for instructional leadership. (P4)

Safety and Management of the Building. Two of the study participants (15.4%) identified safety and building management as challenges faced in the role of high school principal. Although seven of the 13 study participants had identified safety and security as part of their responsibilities as high school principal, only one came back to the specific topic of safety when asked about challenges. Principal 7 stated, “The greatest challenge to me is the safety of my school, including the physical and emotional safety of this institution.” (P7)

Principal 1 identified the management of the physical plant as a challenge for high school principals. In discussing this topic, Principal 1 pointed out that, entering the principalship, there had been no training on the basics of the physical plant, rhetorically asking, “Who does the lights? Who does the heat? Who does the air? Who does transportation? Do I call the city or the school district?” (P1)

Research Question Two Summary. High school principals interviewed for this study were able to provide numerous responses when asked about the challenges they face in their job. Five themes arose from those responses, and are listed as follows:

1. Meeting testing and accountability standards with reduced funding
2. Hiring and personnel issues
3. Meeting the instructional needs of students and motivating students and staff
4. Having enough time to do everything
5. Keeping the school safe and managing the building

Research Question Three Themes and Summary

The third research question asked for current high school principals' recommendations for professional development activities or developmental experiences for aspiring high school principals. To get those recommendations, each principal was asked these four questions:

1. What professional development activities did you engage in to prepare for the position as high school principal?
2. Did you participate in the principals' academy provided by this school district or any school district? If yes, how do you feel it helped prepare you for your current position?
3. What experiences as an assistant principal equipped you for the high school principalship?
4. What professional development activities or experiences do you recommend to prepare for the increasing and varying responsibilities of high school principals?

Professional Development to Prepare for High School Principalship. In response to interview questions about professional development activities experienced as an assistant principal as well as professional development activities engaged in to prepare for the position of high school principal, the 13 study participants provided the information contained in Table 4-9. The table provides the list of activities and experiences mentioned as well as the number of study participants who mentioned each.

Table 4-9

Professional Development Experienced as Assistant Principal or Engaged in to Prepare for Becoming High School Principal

Professional Development Activity or Experience	Number of Principals Identifying the Activity
Formal academy for aspiring principals	5
Doctoral coursework	2
Specific training to build relationships or motivate	3
Administrative cohort other than formal academy	2
Specific student management training	2
Specific instruction and curriculum training	4
Time management training	1
Instructional Leadership Development training	2
Training on legal issues in education and special education	2
School improvement training	2
Master scheduling	4
Working on campus plan with campus leadership team	1
Teacher appraisal system training	2
Working with parents	1
Hiring and/or personnel experiences	3
Data disaggregation training and experiences	3
PEIMS (Public Education Information System) training	1
Budget/Accounting/Funding training	2
Experiences as a teacher	1
Experiences as a department head	1
Experiences as a counselor	1
Experiences as a dean of instruction	2
Experiences as an associate principal	4
Building and/or supervising entire programs	3
Experience in opening a new school	1
Serving as summer school principal	1

From the 26 professional development experiences identified by study participants, the most frequently mentioned items are identified in Table 4-10. An explanation of each of the items is discussed following Table 4-10.

Table 4-10

Most Frequently Identified Professional Development Experienced as Assistant Principal or Engaged in to Prepare for Becoming High School Principal

Activity	Frequency	Percent of Sample
Formal academy for aspiring principals	5	38.4
Specific instruction/curriculum training	4	30.8
Master scheduling	4	30.8
Experience as associate principal	4	30.8

Formal Academy for Aspiring Principals. Five of the 13 study participants (38.4%) responded that they had participated in a formal academy for aspiring principals, either in their current school district or in another location prior to becoming a high school principal. Comments by the principals regarding their experiences in such an academy include:

- The academy was a tremendous help, especially the opportunity to interact with others. We learned about budgeting, master scheduling, and other critical things that you must know to run your own organization. We were given assignments, and we were learning and growing, and sharpening the saw. (P7)
- The most important thing to me about the academy was learning how to do reflections. (P10)
- It was a great, great experience. It provided much information that forced you to look at and think about all the management pieces. Over the years, the academy in this district has been refined and tweaked, adding key pieces each time. (P1)

- I participated in an academy through the Region Service Center. It was an aspiring principals academy when I was an assistant principal. My principal allowed me to go, and I believe it was important. (P11)
- It was very beneficial to me, and the reason for it is that, first of all, we networked with people from different campuses. I liked that people from different areas came in to speak with us. We had someone come in from human resources, community relations, and business/finance. Then we also had principals from all levels of elementary, middle, and high school come in and talk with us about what you do on a daily basis. (P8)

Specific Instruction/Curriculum Training. Four study participants (30.8%) identified one or more specific instructional or curriculum training as part of their preparation for becoming a high school principal. The specific trainings identified included:

- Cycle of continuous improvement training
- *Failure is not an option* training (Blankstein, 2004)
- Classroom walk-through training
- Advanced placement training
- Data disaggregation training
- Texas Association of Secondary School Principals conferences
- STAAR training
- Instructional strategies for Hispanic students
- *A framework for understanding poverty* training (Payne, 2001)

Master Scheduling. Receiving training in how to create the school's master schedule and then actually creating and manipulating the master schedule was mentioned by four (30.8%) of the study participants as a key part of their preparation for becoming a high school principal. Principal 7 identified the importance of master scheduling by stating,

I think one of the most important things was learning to do master scheduling because I think that gives you a really different picture of the way a school functions, and it teaches you to play to the strengths of your staff members because manipulating what they're teaching, and letting them play to their strengths makes your staff better. Many times if you can look at the master schedule and get them teaching something they like, then I think they're much better teachers, and they're going to work harder every day. The other thing is master scheduling gives you a big picture of how you can really change the course of the school day and the impact on learning by putting things in certain places. Understanding and being able to do the master schedule teaches you about how the whole school functions. (P7)

Experience as Associate Principal. Of the 13 high school principals in this study, nine (69.2%) had served in the role of associate principal at either the high school or middle school level. When asked what professional development experiences had been beneficial in preparation for becoming high school principal, four of the participants (30.8%) spoke of the importance of being an associate principal. Prior to becoming high school principal, study participants P1 and P4 served in the role of high school associate principal for four years, and made these statements about the position:

- Associate principal is pivotal. I can't begin to talk about how much I learned in that role because you do it all. You do the management, the leadership, you are immersed in preparation. I thought I was ready after year two as associate, but I wasn't ready. You need a good four years as an associate principal before you can touch everything you need to know and do in this role of high school principal. (P1)
- A really good experience for me was being associate principal. The stuff you get as associate is all good. Building master schedules, putting teams together and working through those teams, crunching data . . . you get a lot of that. Being an associate principal made it really solid. I was prepared at that point, after being able to do different things and see how that all works. I think being an associate principal is a really good role to be in, especially if it's designed for someone who's an aspiring principal. I would not have traded that experience for anything. It's a good foundation for learning this role. (P3)

Other Recommendations for Professional Development. Each of the 13 study participants was asked to provide additional recommendations for professional development activities or experiences to prepare for the responsibilities of high school principals. Many of the same topics that the principals had identified as experiences and activities they had received prior to becoming high school principals were also identified as professional development recommendations. Professional development topics recommended which were not already identified in this chapter are listed below, in no preferential order:

1. Transcripts and graduation plans

2. Technology
3. Educational law and legal topics
4. Psychology
5. Administrator sharing, internships, or shadowing
6. Special education
7. Goal setting and reflection

Research Question Three Summary. There were many relevant professional development activities and experiences identified by the high school principals in this study. More emphasis was placed throughout this research process by study participants on the real-life experiences gained than on particular training sessions. On-the-job experiences as a teacher, department head, counselor, assistant principal, associate principal, and dean of instruction were emphasized by the study participants as important in their preparation for the high school principalship. As stated by Principal 3, “The professional development is important, but there is nothing like getting that on the job training.” Additionally, four of the 13 principals (30.8%) made comments during their interviews about not really understanding all the roles and responsibilities of the high school principalship until they were actually in the position. The following statement from Principal 4 accents this thought:

All the opportunities I was given helped put me in this position. But when I got this job, the learning curve was still vertical. No matter what you do, until the buck stops with you and every question ultimately ends up on your desk, you cannot be completely prepared for the position. It is one that you have to learn as you go. (P4)

Chapter Four Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore current perceptions of high school principals in a mid-size Texas school district regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be high school principals. The results of this study have been presented in Chapter Four using data from interview transcripts. Portions of the exact wording from the transcribed interviews have been used to emphasize the perceptions of study participants.

For most of the interview questions, participants' responses were present and genuine. In a few instances; however, some principals did not provide clear responses to the survey questions. The results of this study show that, depending on the individuals in the study, perceptions of high school principals vary. The authenticity of the data captured in the interview transcripts and the richness of the data collection process are advantages of doing a qualitative study such as this.

Chapter Five

Conclusions, Implications, Suggestions for Research, and Concluding Thoughts

The goal of this study was to advance the understanding of high school principals and their perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, challenges, and recommendations for professional development to prepare for the job. Chapter Four of this study provided an analysis of the data derived from individual interviews with 13 high school principals. This chapter will provide conclusions, implications for practice, suggestions for further research, and concluding thoughts. Chapter Five provides closure to this research study.

Conclusions

Research Question One. The first research questions asked, “What are the perceptions of high school principals regarding their role as the school principal, and how do these perceptions align with what they actually do daily?” Responses were solicited from practicing high school principals regarding their perceptions about their roles and responsibilities. The conclusion drawn from the interview data is that the principals perceive that they have a tremendous level of responsibility in the position of high school leader. The role is not well defined and is continually changing and increasing. Statements directly from the principals that support these conclusions include:

- The role is not rigidly defined. You’re everything all at once. You’re a lot of things to a lot of different people. It’s not only about busses and books; it’s about social issues, political concerns, legislative mandates, making every dollar count. It’s about so many different things. (P12)
- There is too much for any one person to do. (P4)
- That’s a tough question because the role is ever-changing. (P2)

- It just seems like more and more things keep getting piled onto the high school principal. (P3)
- It's just a challenge to keep your head above water. (P4)

Principals' responses to question one indicated that 100 per cent of the 13 study participants believe that providing quality instruction and managing the organization are important parts of their roles and involve their time daily. Coming in second with 76.9 per cent as far as principal responses is their perception of their roles surrounding communication, including building relationships and motivating students and staff. The other roles identified by the high school principals in this study fall into the themes of providing a safe learning environment (53.8%), understanding and communicating policy and accountability information (46.2%), and providing leadership and setting the tone for the culture of the school (30.8%).

Responses from the study participants align with findings in the literature regarding the roles and responsibilities of the high school principal and what they actually do daily. High school principals in this study indicated that management tasks overshadow their opportunities to be instructional leaders. The following statements support this:

- We're responsible for making sure that our teachers are providing quality instruction. The challenge is that we have a tremendous amount of management tasks. I mean the management tasks can consume you, so I literally build in time for instructional leadership. (P4)
- In a perfect world, I think we'd be a curricular leader and a leader of teachers. (P9)

- Leadership comes from instructional leadership which comes down to daily practices in the classroom. All the management pieces are just distractions, just the stuff that's got to be done. To balance these, I list my distractions for the month so that I don't get frustrated or overwhelmed or irritated when they're in my way for what I have to remain focused on, and that's instructional leadership. (P1)

It is interesting that all 13 of the high school principals in this study mentioned aspects of management when defining their roles and responsibilities, but only four actually made direct statements tied to leadership and culture. Even though they are the campus principal, the leader of the organization, the study participants' responses focused on management versus leadership. Kotter (2012), looked at the difference between management and leadership. He defined leadership as creating the systems that managers manage, and transforming them as needed to allow for growth, evolution, and safety. It involves creating and communicating a vision and setting the organization's direction; aligning people; motivating action; and developing systems for managers to manage. On the other hand, management involves assuring that systems work well day after day. This includes planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, problem-solving, controlling, and assuring that systems run efficiently and effectively. Bush (2007) in a review of educational leadership and management determined that the concept of management overlaps with that of leadership, with management linked to systems and paper while leadership involves the development of people. He went on to say that, "Leadership and management need to be given equal prominence if schools are to operate effectively and achieve their objectives (Bush, 2007).

Research Question Two. Research question two asked study participants to identify their perceptions of the greatest challenges they face in the role of high school principal. Six of the respondents (46.2%) indicated challenges with accountability and funding, which does not align with findings in the literature. However, because this study was done during the 2011-12 school year in a school district in Texas, this response seems logical. In the school district used for this research (Jenville ISD), because of funding reductions in the state of Texas, there had been significant reductions in force and other budget cuts during the two school years previous to this study. These reductions particularly affected staffing at Jenville high schools, including elimination of many instructional support positions, an increase in student/teacher ratios from 20:1 to 23:1, and the loss of an additional planning period for high school teachers of core courses.

The challenge with accountability is also understandable in Jenville ISD due to the fact that the state of Texas in 2011-12 is in transition from the TAKS to the STAAR assessment used as the primary accountability measure. High school principals in Texas are absorbed in a year of unknowns during this transition with daily updates and changes issued by the Texas Education Agency. As Principal 13 stated, "The biggest challenge going right now is all the testing that's required because that dictates what direction schools go and dictates which direction principals go."

The remaining themes determined as perceived challenges for high school principals are aligned with the literature review. Those include hiring and personnel issues, instruction and motivation, time management, and building management, and safety.

Research Question Three. The final research question asked study participants to identify professional development activities and experiences that would benefit aspiring high school principals. The most frequently mentioned of these were on-the-job training experiences, including being part of a formal aspiring principals academy, learning and using master scheduling, and serving in the role of associate principal. The importance of preparation related to instructional practices was perceived as important by the high school principals. Principal 3 made these comments:

I've always made it a point to make sure that I understood the teaching and learning process. I don't know if school districts really do enough preparation for assistant principals to really grow them into instructional leaders. As the building principal, I believe you ought to be able to provide tips on how to be a better teacher. And if you can't go in and model a lesson for somebody or coach them, you're probably in over your head as the principal. (P3)

Implications for Practice

This study reinforces the significance of the roles and challenges of the high school principal and emphasizes the need for professional development experiences to prepare for the role. As the high school principalship continues to expand and become more complex, frustrations and challenges for school leaders are on the rise with little relief in sight. More accountability, less funding, more responsibilities, less support staff, decreased student and staff motivation . . . these are the realities for high school principals. As Principal 13 in this study stated, "Being a high school principal is an enjoyable experience, but I would advise anybody that, if you don't know how to deal

with stress, this job is not for you. If you don't know how to deal with stress, you're not going to survive.

Information provided in this study will provide those currently in the role of high school principal with literature and research based upon interviews with peers actually sitting in the principal's chair. Additionally, this report will provide information for superintendents and other district administrators to review as part of succession planning for high school principal positions. Themes identified in this study may be used by school districts as considerations for professional development opportunities and experiences for future principals, including agenda topics for academies for aspiring high school principals.

For those aspiring to become a high school principal, this study will provide literature and research based upon interviews with practitioners. After a review of this report, aspiring principals may become further rooted in their desire to prepare for and become a high school principal. On the other hand, with this report providing significant information about the expanding roles, the level of responsibilities, and the challenges that come with the position, aspirations and preparation for becoming a high school principal could change or be adjusted.

Suggestions for Further Research

The research in this study is based upon the perceptions of 13 high school principals regarding their roles, responsibilities, challenges, and recommendations for professional development for aspiring high school principals. Further research is recommended on several topics, and is discussed in this section.

Because this research was based upon responses from high school principals in one school district in one state, further study is necessary to determine if the roles, responsibilities, and challenges described by the principals in this study will remain consistent with high school principals in other districts and states. It would be especially interesting to see if the challenges with accountability and budget reductions experienced by the participants in this study correlate with those of high school principals in other states or regions of the United States.

In this study, five of the high school principals (38.4%) indicated that they had gone through a formal academy program for aspiring principals. Further study on the effects of going through such an academy is recommended. The number of academy participants who go on to become principals as well as the length of time it takes from completing the academy before obtaining the principal position could be compared with the number of principals who do not go through a formal academy. For principals identified as successful, the study could look at whether or not they went through an academy, and if so, the length of time the academy lasted, how often its members met, and what topics benefitted the principals. Such a study could also provide recommendations for improvement in aspiring principal academies, which are often an important part of a school district's succession planning process.

Because this was a qualitative study, the open-ended interview questions used for the research could be adjusted to accommodate a quantitative study. For example, the open-ended interview question used in this study, "What do you perceive to be your greatest challenges as high school principal?" could be changed to include a quantitative response in written format with a pre-developed answer list asking respondents to

prioritize their challenges. Providing written questions with easy-to-answer responses in a non-open-ended format would provide quantitative data to use for a study on high school principals' perceptions of their roles and challenges.

Because the emphasis by principals in this study when discussing their roles and responsibilities was primarily on management tasks secondary to the actual leadership of the school, a study could be done to examine if this finding is aligned with other similar studies on the roles and responsibilities of high school principals. If the finding is consistent with this study, that is an emphasis on management over leadership, this might bring about an additional study to look at student achievement in high schools with principals who focus more on their role of leader over manager.

A comparative study could be conducted to look at middle school or elementary school principals' responses to the same interview questions used in this study. It would be interesting to see how middle school or elementary school principals in the same school district as used for this study would respond to the research questions. How would the themes differ or align with those determined in this study based upon high school principal responses?

An additional comparative study could involve retired high school principals or those who are now in central office positions to see if their answers to the interview questions used for this study would compare with current principals' answers. Would the answers of former high school principals correlate with those currently in the position?

Concluding Thoughts

It was during the summer of 2011 when I began the journey to find answers to three research questions and provide a qualitative study regarding those questions.

Because I spent most of my career in the high school setting and because I believed the topic to be relevant, I determined that my research topic would focus on the roles and challenges of high school principals. With the help and guidance of my advisor, I then made the decision to pursue this topic as a qualitative study. It was my goal to take the transcribed data from the 13 interviews with high school principals and interpret it in a way that would genuinely portray the thoughts of those who voluntarily participated in this study.

Often in this study, the participants' responses were powerful, meaning that the researcher found the high school principals' interview responses to contain insightful comments, conflicting statements, and surprising remarks. In fact, the participants' direct remarks during the interviews were the data, the story, and the actual findings of the study. Although the topics discussed with the 13 study participants focused on roles responsibilities, and challenges, all of the high school principals made positive remarks during their interviews about the job. All of the study participants made statements about the rewards of the job, and none spoke of wanting to move away from the role of high school principal.

During my career which has been entirely in education, I was a high school teacher for eight years, and then a high school administrator serving in the roles of assistant principal, associate principal, dean of instruction and principal for ten years. Additionally, I served as a middle school associate principal and then principal for six years. For the last seven years, I have been in central administration, serving in the roles of area superintendent, director of secondary schools, chief human resources officer, and currently assistant superintendent in the Department of School Administration. My

journey has included working in six different school districts, all in Texas, ranging in size from 3A to large 5A. I have served as the building principal in three separate high schools, ranging in size from 750 students to over 3,000 students. Doing this study gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences while I was reviewing the literature and conducting the interviews with high school principals. This research experience has affirmed my thoughts about what it takes to be a successful high school principal. I actually relate the position to three key characters from the Wizard of Oz, as described in the points that follow:

- The scarecrow wanted a brain ó successful high school principals must also have a brain. You don't have to be a genius, but you need to be sharp and able to think on your feet.
- The tin-man wanted a heart ó successful high school principals must have a heart. The job is too big not to love it, to love the kids, to show compassion.
- The lion wanted courage ó successful high school principals must display courage. Being able to take a stand, to make difficult decisions, and to hold those challenging conversations all require courage. I believe this is the most difficult aspect of the job and the one that often keeps mediocre high school principals from becoming great high school principals.

Doing this study has caused me to renew and to increase my respect and appreciation for high school principals, and to realize that the job is full of challenges and continues to expand. Conducting the interviews with the principals was very rewarding for me, and truly a journey of learning and growth. At the end of the day, my biggest piece of advice to an aspiring high school principal is to be sure that you are ready for the

job. Don't hurry into it. Take your time, learn from others, and develop your leadership skills. The job is way too big for anyone who doesn't love it or for anyone who is not prepared for the roles, responsibilities, and challenges that come with being a high school principal.

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APPENDIX A
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN CONFIDENTIAL RESEARCH

PROJECT TITLE: Perceptions of the Roles and Challenges of High School Principals In A Diverse Mid-Size School District in Texas

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Rhonda McWilliams from the Department of Education at the University of Houston. This research project is part of a doctoral thesis conducted under the supervision of Dr. Allen Warner.

NON-PARTICIPATION STATEMENT: Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw any time. You may also refuse to answer any question.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to explore current perceptions of high school principals in a mid-size Texas school district regarding their perceived roles, the challenges they face in their position, and their recommendations for professional development for those who aspire to be a high school principal.

PROCEDURES: You will be one of approximately 13 subjects asked to participate in this project. The study is one of exploratory qualitative design. A cross-sectional survey will be used to collect information from a pre-identified set of high school principals. Each subject will be given a set of standard open-ended interview questions to review in advance. Then an interview with each subject individually will be conducted to gain answers to the questions. The interview will last an hour to an hour and a half. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed with the results used to identify common themes relevant to the research study. A copy of the questions for the interview is included on page four for your review prior to the interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your participation in this project will be held in confidence with every effort made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Your participation will be paired with a code number by me, the principal investigator. This code number will appear within the results of the research project. However, the list pairing the names of subjects to the assigned code numbers will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. No names of participants will be included in the study's results. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this research project.

BENEFITS: While you will not directly benefit from participation in this project, you will receive a copy of the research report once completed. It is hoped that the report will provide for you an addition to your body of knowledge as well as a review of suggestions for professional development to better prepare aspiring high school principals.

ALTERNATIVES: Participation in this project is voluntary and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.

PUBLICATION STATEMENT: The results of this study may be published in professional and/or scientific journals. It may also be used for educational purposes or for professional presentations. However, no individual subject will be identified.

AGREEMENT FOR THE USE OF AUDIO/VISUAL TAPES: The interview will be audio-taped, with your consent, for transcription and use confidentially in the research project. The audio tapes will be used only for transcription purposes by the investigator. If you consent to participate in this study, please indicate whether you agree to be audio-taped during the study by checking the appropriate box below:

- ☐ I agree to be audio-taped during the interview.
- ☐ I do not agree to be audio-taped during the interview.

CIRCUMSTANCES FOR DISMISSAL FROM PROJECT: Your participation in the project may be terminated by the principal investigator:

- If you are not able to uphold interview appointments;
- If you do not follow the instructions you are given for participation;
- If the principal investigator determines that staying in the project is harmful to your health or is not in your best interest; or
- If the doctoral thesis advisor decides to stop or cancel the project.

SUBJECT RIGHTS

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.
2. All procedures were explained to me and all questions answered to my satisfaction.
3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me.
4. Any benefits have been explained to me.
5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Rhonda McWilliams at 281-634-1030 or Dr. Allen Warner, UH faculty sponsor, at 713-743-5059.
6. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.
7. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UH COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (713-743-9204). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UH ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.
8. All information obtained in connection with this project that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within legal limits. Information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than principal investigator and UH faculty sponsor. Results may be published in journals, professional publications, or presentations without identifying me by name.

I HAVE READ (OR HAVE HAD READ TO ME) THE CONTENTS OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED TO ASK QUESTIONS. I HAVE RECEIVED ANSWERS TO MY QUESTIONS. I GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I HAVE RECEIVED (OR WILL RECEIVE) A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY RECORDS AND FUTURE REFERENCE.

Study Subject (print name) _____

Signature of Study Subject

Date

I HAVE READ THIS FORM TO THE SUBJECT AND/OR THE SUBJECT HAS READ THIS FORM. AN EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH WAS GIVEN AND QUESTIONS FROM THE SUBJECT WERE SOLICITED AND ANSWERED TO THE SUBJECT'S SATISFACTION. IN MY JUDGMENT, THE SUBJECT HAS DEMONSTRATED COMPREHENSION OF THE INFORMATION.

Principal Investigator: Rhonda McWilliams

R. McWilliams
Signature of Principal Investigator

October 15, 2011
Date

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introductory Information

1. What is your educational background?
2. When you were hired into your current position as high school principal, were you an internal or out-of-district candidate?
3. What is your career history leading up to your current position as high school principal?

Roles and Challenges

1. Being a high school principal is a difficult job. What are your perceptions of your role as high school principal?
2. What do you perceive to be the most important responsibilities for a high school principal?
3. What do you perceive to be your greatest challenges as high school principal?

Professional Development Information and Recommendations

1. What professional development activities did you engage in to prepare for the position as high school principal?
2. Did you participate in the Principal's Academy provided by this or any School District? If yes, how do you feel it helped prepare you for your current position?
3. What experiences as an assistant principal equipped you for the high school principalship?
4. What professional development activities or experiences do you recommend to prepare for the increasing and varying responsibilities of high school principals?

APPENDIX B

From: XXXXX
Sent: Tuesday, July 12, 2011 11:36 AM
To: McWilliams, Rhonda
Cc: XXXXX
Subject: Re: Your Research Application

Good Morning,

Your research application titled **“Perceptions of the Roles and Challenges of High School Principals in a Mid-Size School District in Texas” (Application No.: 2011-16)** has been approved by XXXX ISD. You have the district approval to interview the 13 high school principals of the district. Please note that the XXXXX ISD staff is not obligated to participate in the study despite the district approval. Please obtain informed consent before you conduct the research.

This email will serve as an approval letter. If you need an official letter with the XXXXX ISD letterhead, please let us know and we can provide one as well.

When you complete your research, please submit the Data Collection Completion Notification Form (available on XXXXX research website) and share with us your findings in a summary.

We wish you good luck in your research efforts. If you have any further question, please let us know.

XXXXX

Coordinator of Research and Program Evaluation

XXXXX Independent School District

APPENDIX C



UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

COMMITTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

September 20, 2011

Ms. Rhonda McWilliams
c/o Dr. Allen R. Warner
Curriculum and Instruction

Dear Ms. McWilliams:

Based upon your request for exempt status, an administrative review of your research proposal entitled "Perception of the Roles and Challenges of High School Principals in a Diverse Mid-Size School District in Texas" was conducted on September 7, 2011.

At that time, your request for exemption under **category 2** was approved pending modification of your proposed procedures/documents.

The changes you have made adequately respond to the identified contingencies. As long as you continue using procedures described in this project, you do not have to reapply for review.* Any modification of this approved protocol will require review and further approval. Please contact me to ascertain the appropriate mechanism.

If you have any questions, please contact Alicia Vargas at (713) 743-9215.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Sherman'.

Anne. Sherman
Interim Director, Research Compliance

*Approvals for exempt protocols will be valid for 5 years beyond the approval date. Approval for this project will expire **July 1, 2016**. If the project is completed prior to this date, a final report should be filed to close the protocol. If the project will continue after this date, you will need to reapply for approval if you wish to avoid an interruption of your data collection.

Protocol Number: 11461-EX

APPENDIX D

Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. There are ten open-ended questions in today's interview. The questions are grouped into three sections: Introductory Information, Roles and Challenges, and Professional Development Information and Recommendations.

In the Introductory Information section, you will be asked about your educational background. The intent of this question is to get at your degrees and certifications, including any that you are currently working on.

Within the Roles and Challenges section, you will be asked your perceptions of your role as high school principal as well as your perceptions of the most important responsibilities of your job. For clarification, with the role of high school principal, that focus would be more on the "big picture" of your job, the leadership components whereas the most important responsibilities would be more focused on the management activities.

The third section of this interview focuses on professional development. You will be asked what activities you engaged in to prepare for becoming a high school principal. Your response may include college degrees, on-the-job experiences, internships, leadership academies, training, and so forth.

If there are any questions during the interview that you don't understand, please let me know and we can discuss the intent of the question for purposes of this research project.

At this time, let's get started with the interview.